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OR,
**DREAD DON,
OF THE COOL CLAN.**

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "BROAD-
CLOTH BURT," "CALIFORNIA CLAUDE,"
"FLASH DAN," "COOL CONRAD,"
"DESPERATE DOZEN," "DENVER
DUKE," "KEEN KENNARD,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SURPRISED SPORT.

"JUNIPER JOSH! hyer I am, gents! I'm no Hercules—don't pretend ter be; but if thar's an infant in Red Blade what thinks he can walk over this bit o' humanity, let 'im sail in!"

The man who spoke thus stood six feet in his stockings, and looked formidable as he posed in the middle of a mountain saloon, and rolled his dark sleeves above his elbows.

The resort was well filled with rough-looking men at the time, and although there were several who looked able to accept the boisterous challenge, nobody stepped forward to fight.

"SEE HERE! THIS IS NO FRESHLY AMPUTATED HAND," HE WENT ON, EXTENDING IT SO SUDDENLY TOWARD DREAD DON THAT THE LATTER INVOLUNTARILY STARTED BACK.

Instead, the challenger was greeted with cries of "Shut up!" "Take him out!" "We've been ter supper!" etc., which, instead of abashing him, only added to the number and the loudness of his boasts.

Everybody between Deadwood and Custer City knew Noisy Nick and his singular byword, "Juniper Josh!" which was the highest limit to his profanity.

He was one of the characters of the Black Hills, and circulated between the two places just named, but made Red Blade, the new mining "city," his principal head-quarters.

Noisy Nick was about thirty-five, and handsome. He had the blackest eyes imaginable, and a figure that was physical perfection. His dark hair, like that of most Western men, touched his shoulders, and it was a habit of his to run his fingers through it when pleased.

He boasted that he had struck more new leads, yet was poorer, than any man in the Hills; he was open and free to all, but guarded zealously the history, if not the mystery, of his past life.

On the night in question Noisy Nick was spoiling for a fight, with several drinks of Red Blade whisky ahead, and in his failure to be accommodated he brought his heavy boots down upon the floor till the bottles on the shelves of Paradise Phil's place fairly shook.

"Nobody with sand in Red Blade, eh?" he went on. "Whar's ther boasted grit ov this camp? Hyer's whar they hev a Cool Clan, I'm told, an organization that is supposed ter be able ter whip its weight in she wild-cats. I don't hear any response from it—not to-night. No, indeedy!"

Nobody seemed disposed to check the roysterer; indeed, not one-fourth of the tenants of the place were paying the slightest attention to him. In one corner several games of cards were proceeding, and groups of men stood along the bar.

"I take in the hull shootin'-match," cried Noisy Nick. "I kin whip any man in Dakota, whether he b'longs ter ther Territory or not!"

At this there was a quick start by a man at the bar. He was in the act of lifting a glass to his lips when the sweeping challenge was heard.

"That means me," he said in audible tones. "I allow nobody to throw a glove of this kind at my feet."

He was not the equal of Noisy Nick, but he had the wiriness of the panther coupled to the strength of the tiger.

"Let the horn blow off," said a man who heard the stranger's response. "We know Noisy Nick and honor him. Nobody wants to fight him."

The man addressed looked at the boaster and eyed him madly for a moment.

"Let him keep still then," he said. "He mustn't throw that insulting challenge out again. I don't like it."

"Nobody but cowards in Dakota, eh?" rung from Noisy Nick, and the next moment he supplemented it with a derisive laugh that was cutting in its intonation.

"I resent that!" was the answer spoken so clearly and with such an emphasis that the men at cards looked up and held their 'hands.'

A strange silence fell upon all; one might have heard a feather fall.

In a moment afterward the speaker stepped forward with coolness, and with his eyes fastened on Noisy Nick who looked thunderstruck.

"Do you mean that?" the stranger asked.

"Mean what?" said Noisy Nick.

"Why, what you have just said—that there is nobody but cowards in Dakota?"

"I—I guess I said that."

Noisy Nick's eyes appealed to the crowd as he spoke.

"You said that, Noisy," confirmed several voices.

The stranger quietly took off his hat and then followed it with his coat, thus exhibiting a figure that called forth several expressions of admiration.

"What's your name?" asked Noisy Nick.

"Full Hand Frank."

"Whar d'yer b'long?"

"To Dakota!"

The stranger took another step forward as he answered, and the next second he stood braced before the big braggart ready for the test of strength.

Noisy Nick could look down upon the man who had taken up his gauntlet, and he did so in a manner intended to make Full Hand Frank quail; but instead, a fearless smile appeared under the mustache that shaded the Dakotan's mouth.

"Very well, ef ye'r' anxious ter be pulverized, I'm yer huckleberry," Noisy Nick suddenly exclaimed. "Juniper Josh! I won't leave enough ov yer ter fill a sardine casket. I've thrashed floors with men from Denver ter Deadwood. I kin mop these boards with yer!"

There was no answer. Full Hand Frank, who had planted himself firmly before Noisy Nick, did not budge an inch. He was watching eagerly for the initial pass.

"Ar' yer married?" suddenly said Nick.

"No."

"Hev yer parents?"

"Yes."

"Then I won't pulverize yer. I hev too much respect for their gray hairs."

The crowd burst into a loud laugh at this ludicrous outcome of Noisy Nick's display of valor.

Full Hand Frank bit his lips and looked disgusted.

"You are the coward!" he exclaimed, his eyes flashing while he spoke. "They haven't named you wrongly, Noisy Nick! All noise and no fight! Is this a specimen of Red Blade courage, gentlemen?"

He turned away and reached for the hat and coat which he had thrown to one of his new acquaintances.

"If that wind-trap is a sample of Red Blade grit, I guess I'll go," he went on.

"Who is that man, anyhow?" asked a spectator, as he touched the arm of a neighbor.

"He calls himself Full Hand Frank."

"I know that, but that's only a nick-name. He'll find a fight if he keeps up his remarks about Red Blade. Full Hand Frank, eh? I'll solve the mystery that hangs about that name."

The speaker was about to step forward when a boy with a small wooden box under his arm entered the saloon.

"Is Dread Don here?" sung out the boy.

"Hyer!"

The next minute the man who was about to inquire into Full Hand Frank's identity was confronted by the boy, and the little box was placed in his hands.

"Whar did this come from?" the man asked as he handled the box carefully as if it contained dynamite.

"It arrived a while ago on the stage from Custer."

Dread Don looked at the box again. It was not more than a foot in length and about half as wide. The boards that formed it were rather thin and tightly fitted, and the only address it contained was:

"DREAD DON, RED BLADE."

In an instant, as it were, the mysterious little box was the center of attraction.

"Open 'er up, Don! Bu'st tner lid!" cried the crowd.

Dread Don seemed disposed to do both.

"I don't b'lieve in nailed boxes by stage," he said. "This one has been sent me as a guy of some kind, and I'll show ther sender that I don't take jokes."

The speaker carried the box to the counter upon which he set the box and called for a hatchet which was instantly produced. As the instrument was raised the crowd involuntarily drew back.

What if the first blow should produce an explosion which, if the box contained dynamite, would wreck the saloon and everything in it? There was mystery enough in the box to suggest something of this kind.

"Shut ther door thar!" called out Dread Don. "If this thing bursts, we all go together!" and the following moment the hatchet came down upon the lid of the box amid the most profound silence.

"Nobody dead yet," laughed some one, who had regained courage by the results of the stroke. "Hit 'er ag'in, Don."

In less time than we can describe the operation, the frail head of the box was broken in, and Dread Don's fingers were busy removing the splinters.

All at once the desperado of Red Blade stopped work and stared into the box. The speechless crowd moved forward.

"Jehosaphat!" cried the man, behind the counter. "Red Blade has a mystery at last!"

This was true.

The box was half-filled with fine mountain grass, and on top of it lay a human hand transfixed with a knife, whose blade was about seven inches in length!

Dread Don had seen all this at a glance, and the men who bent over the box saw it, too. The hand which was small and of beautiful shape exhibited no symptoms of decay. The knife was firmly fixed in the flesh, and formed, with the hand itself, a most ghastly picture.

"Whar's that boy?" cried Dread Don, wheeling toward the door.

"Gone!"

"No! hyer he is!"

Ten minutes had elapsed since the boss of Red Blade had taken the mysterious box from the boy and in that time the youth had disappeared and come back.

"Tell me what you know about this box," commanded Dread Don, sternly clutching the boy's right shoulder as he spoke. "It came by stage from toward Custer, eh? I know that, but *who* sent it, and what did Sweet William say about the consignor? Tell all you know, or, by Jupiter! you'll go away from hyer with your neck wrung."

"Mebbe I can send you to a man who knows something about that box," was the reply, as one hand of the boy dived beneath his jacket. "I have just come from the Full Deck, an' here's a card for you, sent by a man who came in on the stage."

Dread Don took the little card held by thumb and finger.

"That's for you, Don," announced the messenger.

"The deuce it is!" ejaculated the sport, leaning over the counter toward the lamp among the bottles behind it. "Let me see who puts on this much style in Red Blade."

The card was thin board, two by three inches, and exactly in the middle was printed in script this rather unique name:

"COLONEL ERASTUS SNOWDROP."

"That's the name of some officious crank," ejaculated Dread Don. "Wants to see me, eh? By Jerusalem! he's come to the wrong place to carry out any foolishness. He's struck the headquarters of ther Cool Clan of which I'm ther acknowledged head. Snowdrop, hey? Whar is he, boy?"

"At the Full Deck."

"I'll tap him!"

Dread Don thrust the card into an inner pocket and laid his hand on the strange box.

"Keep this hyer till I come back," he said to the man behind the bar. "We'll get at this mystery in time, and thar'll be an explanation thar, too. That's a woman's hand—"

"A woman's, Don?"

"It is, ef I'm a judge. Mebbe it means suthin' an' mebbe it don't."

He pushed the little box and its contents across the counter and strode from the saloon.

More than one pair of eyes followed him. Those of the man called Full Hand Frank twinkled, and a faint smile appeared at the corners of his mouth.

As for Dread Don, he was not long covering the distance between Paradise Phil's and the camp's best hotel, the Full Deck.

The building was a long two-story frame, with the bar-room and office all in one in the middle.

Dread Don, with eyes on the alert, strode across the threshold and a minute later a man turned and looked at him.

"I am Colonel Snowdrop," he said.

The boss of Red Blade started, leaned forward and exclaimed:

"You hyar? What does this mean?"

"Why, you ought to know, Dread Don. *The five years expired yesterday!*"

CHAPTER II.

DANGEROUS BLUE EYES.

COLONEL SNOWDROP, who was a perfect Hercules physically, rather red in the face, and the possessor of a pair of very dark brown eyes, spoke his last sentence in a voice almost sunk to a whisper.

"Yes," he repeated as his fingers gave the hand of Dread Don another pressing, "I think you ought to know."

"I do if ther five years ar' up," was the reply; "but I didn't think—"

"That they were, eh?" interrupted the colonel.

"I'll swear I didn't."

"Time flies, doesn't it? But come to my room."

"First, a drink, colonel," said Dread Don. "I guess you haven't turned yer back on ther adder in ther glass."

"Oh, no!"

The two men walked to the bar at one end of the room and proceeded to touch glasses after a friendly fashion.

As they stood side by side the man whose duty it was to sell liquor to the guests of the Full Deck could not help looking at them.

Two such men were not seen every day, not even where men are physically perfect and athletes. They were of the same build and looked very much alike as though they might be brothers. Colonel Snowdrop showed evidences of travel over the rough stage road by which he had lately entered Red Blade, but for all this, his clothes were better than Dread Don's, that is, they were not the coarse ones usually worn at the mines.

He threw his broad brim hat back as he raised his glass, displaying a high forehead beneath which his dark eyes shone with animation. He was under forty; so was the man who confronted him.

"Colonel Snowdrop, eh?" ejaculated the bar-keeper as the two men turned their backs on him and walked off. "Mebbe I'm no judge ov some things, but I'll bet my head that that 'ere man isn't named Snowdrop any more than I'm Saint Peter."

By this time the strangely met twain had ascended to a little room on the second floor, and Colonel Snowdrop had locked the door behind him. The sun had just gone down, and night had fallen over the mountain rival Deadwood, as Red Blade was sometimes called.

Colonel Snowdrop had found means for illuminating the room, and the light fell upon the two men.

"Yes, Dcn, the five years expired yesterday, and thet's why I'm here," he began again.

"What has happened?"

"More ter-night than at any other time," was the answer. "Did you come in on the stage?"

"Yes."

"From Custer?"

"Direct."

"Any other passengers get off hyer?"

"Yes, one."

"Where is he?"

"Rather ask where is *she*," said the colonel, with a smile. "My companion was a young girl, about eighteen, and quite good-looking."

"The deuce!" ejaculated Dread Don. "Red Blade is no paradise for women."

"I should judge not from the reputation it bears," was the reply. "A reputation which the Cool Clan has helped to make."

"You bet yer life—shall I call you colonel?"

"In public for the present. Here I am the old pard, Shasta Leon. Now, what has happened?"

"In the first place, I hev a good grip on ther bonanza. I am master here with six ov ther coolest heads that ever seconded a venture."

"The Cool Clan?"

"Ther Cool Clan! You heven't seen these men, but you shall before long. I didn't pick 'em up at random. I knew every one before I called them to ther work. The secret is no myth, colonel. Under this very hotel is gold enough ter bust every fero bank west ov ther Missouri. I told yer ter hunt me up at ther end ov five years, an' I'd show yer a bonanza that'd open yer eyes. I kin do thet. We hev made Red Blade ther rival ov Deadwood, an' ther galoots thar know thet Dread Don an' his Clan ar' no infants. As fer Custer—pshaw! we don't keer thet fer the place!" And the speaker snapped his fingers derisively.

"But what happened to-night?"

"Sweet William fetched a box up addressed ter me."

"A box?"

"A little box. It looked like it might contain dynamite, but instead ov thet it held only a human hand pierced by a dagger!"

The announcement seemed to take Colonel Snowdrop's breath. He did not speak for several seconds.

"A box with a hand in it—a *real* hand?" he asked, at last.

"Flesh an' blood, ef thar's much ov the latter in a dead hand," said Dread Don, with a grin. "It war a woman's hand, an'—"

"Heavens! where is that infamous thing?"

"I left it at Paradise Phil's, whar it war delivered ter me. It war put on ther stage at Custer by some one. Sweet William must know, but he has changed horses and gone on. What do you know, colonel! You got on ther stage thar."

Colonel Snowdrop, greatly agitated, rose and walked to the window. He was followed by Dread Don's eyes, which regarded him with startling interest.

"That hand troubles him," said the desperado of Red Blade to himself. "He would rather it had not come up in the stage with him."

All at once Colonel Snowdrop wheeled and came back to Dread Don.

"I want that hand and the dagger!" he said, as his own hand fell on the sport's shoulder. "I want to see them. I want them right away!"

Dread Don got up.

"Hev them ye shall," he said, "an' thet within five minutes!"

The next moment the Full Deck's newest guest was alone, and Dread Don's boots were heard on the carpetless stair.

"Still on the trail if I'm not mistaken," muttered the colonel in audible tones to himself. "They are going to make me a tiger at the end of the game. We have found the bonanza; we are in possession of it and all Tartarus shall not drive us away. We paid enough for the secret in one sense, and in another it did not cost us much. I will not be alone when it comes to work. Dread Don has organized what he calls the Cool Clan, and from what I heard of it before setting my foot in Red Blade, it is no baby band."

He walked the little room with the air of an impatient man. More than once he took out an elegant gold watch and consulted it.

"Came up from Custer, eh?" he said. "I didn't see it put on the stage, and I had a seat in the vehicle some time before it started. Who sent that box, and why to Dread Don?"

At this moment there were footsteps on the stair and the sport of Red Blade came in with the little wooden box under his arm.

Colonel Snowdrop's eyes became riveted upon it the moment he saw the commonplace object, and when Dread Don placed it on the stand near the window and directly under the lamp, he started forward with much eagerness.

"Hyar's ther dead lay-out," said Dread Don, removing the lid. "This is what came up from Custer with you, Shasta Leon."

Colonel Snowdrop was intently gazing at the terrible object lying on the soft grass that filled the box partly—the dead human hand pierced by the seven-inch dagger!

Dread Don looked, too, but not at the hand; his eyes were fastened on the face of his companion.

"In God's name, who sent it, anyhow?" suddenly asked the colonel, looking up and meeting Dread Don's keen gaze.

"That's what I'd like ter know. But never mind; we'll find out!"

"It is a woman's hand, sure enough," declared

the colonel. "And don't you see that it has been embalmed?"

"I did not notice that."

"Well, it has been," and the next moment Colonel Snowdrop had lifted the ghastly object from the box. "See here! this is no freshly-amputated hand," he went on, extending it so suddenly toward Dread Don that the latter involuntarily started back. "It has been prepared for shipment. Look! I can't pull the dagger out. It was driven through the hand before it was placed in the box. What say you now, Don?"

"That the mystery is as deep as it was when the infernal hand first came," was the reply.

"Can't you get a grip on it at all?"

"No."

"Think!" persisted the colonel, with a smile.

"I have thought till my head hurts. It may mean that we are ter be cheated out o' ther bonanza we hev found; but we never shall. Not by human power—no! not by ther powers of the pit!"

"Doesn't this daggered hand mean more than that, Dread Don?"

"What?"

"Vengeance!"

"Vengeance? On whom?" cried the desperado, looking into the colonel's face. "Is there any livin' person fool enough ter pit himself ag'in' ther Cool Clan ov Red Blade?"

"Doesn't this hand answer your question in the affirmative?"

Dread Don looked at the hand till his eyes seemed to take fire, and a scowl of defiance and rage settled over his face.

"All right; let ther fool play his game!" he suddenly exclaimed. "With you an' me an' ther Clan ag'in' 'em, colonel, what will it amount ter? Mebbe the young girl what came up with you on ther stage knows something about thet hand."

"It cannot be. She doesn't look like a huntress, soft blue eyes and nut-brown hair. Ruby Ryan she calls herself."

"What fetched her hyer?" cried Dread Don.

"I don't know."

"What business has a girl ov thet description got in Red Blade?"

"You'll have to ask her," said the colonel, snappishly.

"Won't I?" was the retort. "It is a singular coincidence that this Ruby Ryan an' thet hand an' dagger should come ter Red Blade at ther same time. You don't know woman as I do, colonel. Look hyer! behold the work ov three ov ther hated sex."

As he finished, Dread Don threw back his coat and opened the bosom of his dark shirt. Colonel Snowdrop leaned forward and saw on the broad breast displayed by the action a brand representing a Maltese cross above which were three straight marks.

"You hadn't that when I saw you last!" he said.

"No, I got it in the mountains," grated Dread Don. "An' one of ther witches thet gave it ter me had blue eyes like this Ruby Ryan."

"They corraled you, eh? Where was the Cool Clan?"

"It had no real existence yet. I was cornered." Dread Don spoke the words with bitterness. "With two revolvers at my head, what could I do, even when the brandin'-iron hissed before my face. You may think all blue eyes innocent, Shasta Leon, but I know better. I've got my eyes on a man who came to Red Blade at sun-down—a man who was never hyer before. Who is he? Never mind! You shall know all by to-morrow night. I will find this blue-eyed daisy of yours, an' show you a viper. Ruby Ryan, eh? It's a durned pretty name, but I'll bet my head that she saw this hand an' cagger afore ter-night. We've got ter fight for ther bonanza an' for ourselves. I am willin'. Let Red Blade be ther battlefield. When it is all over, I will still be Dread Don. Bet yer life!"

CHAPTER III.

THE COLONEL'S QUICK TRIGGER.

COLONEL ERASTUS SNOWDROP, or Shasta Leon, drew back and looked at the man who spoke thus. Dread Don's face was in the full light, and the words uttered by him were the words of a determined and defiant man.

"We will fight it out together," cried Snowdrop, leaping forward suddenly and clutching the arm of the desperate sport. "The battle is ours, and we must stand together. The person who makes war on you makes it also on me."

"And on ther Cool Clan, too. Remember thet, colonel."

"Yes!"

"Thet hand is ther declaration of hostilities!" continued Dread Don, pointing to the daggered hand which lay on the table. "It means war ter ther hilt ov ther knife stickin' in it. Now, show me ther blue-eyed Jezebel thet hes come ter Red Blade!"

Dread Don broke from the colonel's grasp and started for the door.

"Don't precipitate matters," said the new arrival following him up and halting him on the threshold. "We are not certain that Ruby Ryan as she calls herself is in the remotest man-

ner connected with the arrival of the challenge."

"You may not think so, colonel, but I do," said the sport. "Don't think that I'm goin' ter set ther clan on the track like a pack ov bloodhounds. It doesn't take seven men ter smell out a girl in Red Blade. One man kin do thet, an' ther sleuth stands before yer! I heven't set eyes on yer for five years, colonel, as I must call yer, an' I ought ter be askin' questions about how you've put in ther time, but I'll do thet some other time. Ther iron is gettin' hot; we must strike."

"Against a girl who—"

"Always ther girl—ther innocent blue-eyed viper what came ter camp with thet hand!" interrupted Dread Don. "I won't stay ter hear another word about her. I'm off!"

A moment later he went down the steps, his heavy boots creating considerable racket, and the man left behind bit his lip madly while he gazed after him.

"I think he has lost some of his old-time coolness," he said to himself. "At any rate he doesn't seem the man he used to be when we were on the trail of the gold secret six and seven years ago. What put it in his head that the girl who came up in the stage with me is connected with the daggered hand? That girl wagging war against us? The idea is absurd. I would as soon expect to receive a challenge from a babe."

He went back to the table and picked up the hand. The next moment he was turning it over and over in the light while he examined it. The dagger which had a plain polished steel hilt came in for a good share of the inspection, and Colonel Snowdrop did not speak again until he had placed the ghastly object back in the little box and among the mountain grass.

"It is a mystery but we'll get at it," he said.

"Dread Don is right when he says it means war. Can it be that some one is on our track for the deeds of years ago? The holders of the secret gave us a long chase, but we got the best hand at last. Don tells me that I stand over one of the biggest bonanzas in the land. What if Custer knew it? what if Deadwood dreamed of it?"

A noise, the voice of a man in the bar-room below suddenly drew Colonel Snowdrop to the door which had not been tightly shut since Dread Don's departure.

"They don't unharness this mountain boss without kickin'! He's ther boss crittur ov ther Hills—a thoroughbred with a tremendous pedigree. Juniper Josh! Give this Dakota stallion full rein, an' then stand back!"

Colonel Erastus Snowdrop heard these words with the air of a man who had just been unexpectedly startled. His face changed color several times while he listened.

"Who is that man down there?" he exclaimed.

"I have heard that voice before, but not for years. It comes back to me now, connected with a certain event which is connected with my coming to Red Blade. I want to see that man. A glance will satisfy me."

The voice had ceased, and everything was singularly quiet below.

Perhaps the man had left the hotel.

After a little while Colonel Snowdrop stole down the stairs with eagerness depicted on his countenance. Step by step he mastered without much noise.

It was several feet from the bottom of the stairs to the room which was office and the bar in one, and the colonel advanced toward it on tiptoe.

Reaching the open door, he craned his neck forward and looked into the room.

"Hello!" sung out a voice the moment the colonel's head moved beyond the jamb. "Look-in' for anybody, stranger?"

It was too late for Erastus Snowdrop to draw back; he had been discovered.

"I'm no ragin' lion—only a bob-tailed nag from high latitudes," continued the same voice. "So waltz forward an' let us become acquainted."

"I can't help myself, curse his keen eyes!" grated the colonel, and the next moment he stepped into full view, somewhat mortified, and not in the best of humor.

"Oho!" greeted him. "When did *you* arrive in Red Blade? Skin me for a cinnamon! if hyer ain't my old friend ov Jordan Valley. Shake, pard."

Two lengthy strides by the speaker and he was within an arm's length of the colonel and a tremendous hand of bronze was thrust forward for a greeting.

"They call me Noisy Nick in this region," he continued, with a laugh. "I'm allus sp'ilin' for a fight they say. Whoop la! old pard. How is ther valley, anyhow?"

Colonel Snowdrop drew back, looking the man in the eye.

"Noisy Nick, eh?" he said, to himself. "It is the same man. There can be no mistake. Is this accident or fate?"

Then he said aloud:

"I'll take your word for it, Noisy Nick. As for us being pards, that's a disputed point."

"Oh, come now!" laughed the man from high latitudes. "No goin' back on a friend ov other

days. You know me an' I know you. We've met by accident, but thet shouldn't throw an' iceberg between us. Besides," Noisy Nick lowered his voice. "Besides, Shasta Leon, you don't want ter give this mountain boss ther go-by."

Colonel Snowdrop's eyes suddenly flashed. Noisy Nick had leaned forward to speak his last words in a threatening whisper; his face had suddenly assumed a devilish cast.

"I don't know you," said the colonel in a loud bold voice as he straightened and threw a swift glance toward the bartender who was the sole spectator of this strange scene. "You talk riddles when you assume to know me for an old pard. My name is Snowdrop, sir—Colonel Erastus Snowdrop, and I see you for the first time to-night."

Noisy Nick looked like a person at whose feet a thunderbolt had fallen. Consternation filled his eyes.

"Juniper Josh! I've heard ov liars before, but this one skunks me!" he exclaimed.

"Who lies?" flashed the colonel.

"Mankind in gin'ral," was the answer. "Do you mean ter say that you never saw me before to-night?"

"I do."

"Hev yer never been ter Jordan Valley?"

"Never, thank fortune, if it is one of your haunts!"

"Wal, bet yer life it is an' it war once ther haunt ov some one else," said Noisy Nick. "Ther hoss ov high latitudes makes no mistakes. When he makes an assertion he allus stands ready ter prove it. I might give yer a new name afore you leave Red Blade, Kurnel Snowdrop. Juniper Josh! you don't get ahead o' this critter!"

Noisy Nick started toward the door that led into the street. His last glance seemed to tell the colonel that the interview would soon be resumed.

"Let him go and fasten identification upon me?" passed like a flash through Colonel Snowdrop's brain. "This is the last man I want to see here at this time. I thought him dead, or a thousand miles away. It will not do to let him play his bold hand out."

Noisy Nick had reached the door; his back was turned to the colonel. Another moment and he would be on the street and gone.

All at once Dread Don's friend wheeled upon the retreating figure.

"Hold on there!" he cried.

In an instant Noisy Nick had faced the speaker whose hand went up clutching a six-shooter.

"I block your game here!" hissed the colonel through clinched teeth, and the next second with the clear crack of the weapon the Hoss from High Latitudes pitched forward on the floor!

The quick shot and its terrible result seemed to paralyze the man behind the bar.

Colonel Snowdrop came forward with the smoking pistol in his hand, and with wedged lips. Leaning over the counter he thrust forward a hand, and clutched the liquor-vender's wrist.

"What's your name?" he asked.

The man started as if the touch and the voice had given him new life.

"My—name—"

"Yes; be quick!"

"Keno Kife."

"Very well. It is five thousand dollars in your pocket if Red Blade believes that I did not kill that man. You understand. Then, if Red Blade learns it through you your chances to die of old age are desperate. What do you say?"

Colonel Snowdrop clutched the barkeeper's wrist till his fingers seemed to be burning their way to the bone.

"Quick! where's your voice?" he cried.

"All right. I agree," said the man.

"Remember! Five thousand if Red Blade is hoodwinked. Death if you give me away! You will know in time that I had a right to kill that man. See here. I'll give you the cue. Watch me."

Colonel Snowdrop stepped across the room to a window opposite the door which Noisy Nick was about to quit when shot. Raising his revolver he quickly knocked out a glass and turned toward the barkeeper almost before the fragments had reached the ground.

"You understand. The shot that killed Noisy Nick came through the window. The glass was loose which is why the bullet shattered it. Now, remember!"

With a glance toward the burly figure of the man on the floor the colonel went back up the stair.

"It was a lucky meeting for all," he said. "Did that man know I was coming to Red Blade? By whom was he going to prove that I was his pard in Jordan Valley?—by some one in camp to-night? Well, he'll never prove it now."

All at once he heard the tread of a number of men in the room below. Going to the door he listened for a moment.

"Who did this? Who shot Noisy Nick?" he heard half a dozen men ask at the same moment.

"I don't know," said the barkeeper's voice.

"The bullet that did it came in at the window there."

"Good!" ejaculated the colonel a smile appearing on his face. "The man is going to play fair. Perhaps I had better go down. But first, I'll put the box away lest somebody might get in here and disturb it."

He picked up the little pine box, and was about to thrust it under the bed when the lid came off.

As a matter of course, the colonel's eyes looked into the box as he went to adjust the lid, and the next moment he uttered a strange cry.

The hand and the dagger were gone!

"Somebody has been here already!" he exclaimed, going back to the table upon which he placed the empty box, and then threw a hasty glance about the room.

And while he stood there, influenced by the new mystery, he heard some one below say:

"Whar's ther man thet came on ther stage ter-night?"

"Here," said the colonel audibly, and the next moment he was on the stairs.

CHAPTER IV.

LYING IT THROUGH.

In the room below, where Noisy Nick lay on the floor with the lamplight on his face, a score or more of the tenants of Red Blade had congregated.

The shot at the hotel had been heard, somehow or other a rumor of some one being shot had reached Paradise Phil's place, and these men had started out to investigate.

The little wooden box and its ghastly contents were still in their minds, and it is not strange that more than one should connect the two incidents—the shooting and the arrival of the box.

The men of Red Blade were surprised to discover that Noisy Nick was the victim of the shooting. Keno Kife, the bartender of the Full Deck, had given in his testimony with the air of a man who had but one story to tell. He affirmed that the fatal bullet had been fired through the window by parties unknown, and that Noisy Nick had fallen without uttering a cry.

It was at the conclusion of the bartender's testimony that some one asked about the man who had come in on the last stage from Custer City.

"He is up-stairs, gentlemen, in his room," was the reply.

"Call 'im down."

Keno Kiefer knew the men with whom he was dealing, and he knew, too, that they would be put off with no delays. He turned, therefore, toward the stairway, when some one said:

"Hello! he's comin' now."

All eyes were turned toward the doorway that led into the bar-room, and Colonel Snowdrop walked into the presence of the crowd.

He felt that he stood before some of the members of the famous Cool Clan, and if so, he would not be friendless in the hour of danger.

For several moments looks and not speech were exchanged by the colonel and the crowd. Each was "sizing up" the other, but the man from Jordan Valley was trying to pick out Dread Don's pards.

Suddenly a man not more than five feet five in his stockings, but a well-built fellow with eyes that seemed capable of looking one through stepped forward and with one finger pointing at the colonel's victim said sharply:

"What do you know about this?"

Erastus Snowdrop drew himself up proudly and answered with a certain display of dignity:

"I heard a pistol-shot awhile ago."

"Yes," said the little man, "you heard a pistol-shot; but you did not investigate?"

"It would keep a man busy investigating all the pistol-shots he hears in this country," was the reply.

"Pretty much," was the retort, accompanied by the faintest of smiles. "Allow me to ask if you are accustomed to hearing revolvers in the hotels you patronize?"

The colonel was on the eve of flashing up under this sarcastic questioning but he suddenly thought that it would not do to show too much spirit before these men who already looked like avengers.

"I would say I am not. I came in to-night. I have had a long ride over the devil's own road, and I must say, gentlemen, that fatigue made me less active than I should have been perhaps. If anything is wanted about me, I refer you to the man you call Dread Don—a friend of mine."

The last sentence had an immediate effect, and the colonel saw it. He fancied that he could pick out the members to the Cool Clan from the changes of countenances now visible.

As for the little man, he did not appear affected by the reference of the desperado sport. On the contrary, he said:

"We know nobody in Red Blade when it comes to business of this kind. You heard the shot, you say—the one that killed this man?"

"I don't know about that."

"There was but one, Keno says," said the little man, glancing at the bartender, who nodded. "You did not investigate?"

"No."

A moment's silence followed.

"That is all," continued the questioner.

"I would say, gentlemen, that if this man a citizen of Red Blade I suppose, was killed without provocation, his slayer should be hunted down and severely dealt with," said the colonel, with an assurance that amazed the bartender.

"He will be!" said the little man, his black eyes fastened on Colonel Snowdrop. "Don't lose any sleep on that account. There is a law among these mountains that is on no statute books. It is the law of blood for blood! The man on the floor there was my friend; we have been pards when friendship meant something. I know Noisy Nick better than any man living, and there is no man who will go further to avenge him than Reptile Ralph."

Colonel Snowdrop could not repress a start at these last words, Reptile Ralph!

Was this the man by whom Noisy Nick had expected to prove his assertions that he, the colonel, had been an inhabitant of Jordan Valley? If he was, why did not Reptile Ralph recognize him?

"You all hear me," continued the little man lifting his clinched hand and facing the crowd. "I am going to know who did this deed. Noisy Nick was always sp'illin' for a fight, to hear him tell it, but when it came down to a pinch, he never went back on a friend—never! And if Reptile Ralph turns from the trail of his slayer without finding him, may heaven smite him!"

The uplifted hand fell, and the little man stepped back with a final look at the colonel.

On the faces of several men appeared the semblance of a dismal smile, and Snowdrop was quick to catch it.

"They don't take much stock in Reptile Ralph's blood-hunt," he said to himself. "My opinion is that after all he's more wind than work."

Meanwhile Reptile Ralph had walked to the broken window and was looking out. The crowd had ceased to notice him.

"If you an' Dread Don are friends you kin tie ter Red Blade," said a tall man, who stepped up to the colonel, and then he added in a whisper: "You kin make yerself solid hyer by settin' 'em up."

The suggestion was no sooner spoken than it was acted upon, and the man lately from Custer called the whole crowd up to "take something."

The invitation was accepted by all present save one man, the person who stood at the broken window gazing apparently into the darkness beyond. He did not stir, although it was evident that he had heard the call.

"Where have I seen that man before?" muttered Reptile Ralph. "I can't get a grip on him, as I'd like to. I never knew him as Colonel Snowdrop, as I believe he calls himself now. Can't I locate him?"

"Hello thar, Ralph!" sung out a voice at this juncture. "Ye'r included in this. Waltz up hyer an' nominate yer p'isen."

Reptile Ralph turned from the window and faced the crowd. His eyes had an indignant flash.

"With that man thar?" he said, pointing to the body on the floor. "Not much!" and the next moment he was walking sullenly toward the door.

On the hard walk in front of the Full Deck, he turned and raised his hand until it was level with his shoulder.

"Drink with that man in thar? I'd brew my own rum in Tartarus first!" he hissed. "Call yourself Snowdrop if you like. I'll get at your own name before I'm through with this job. I'll make all Red Blade remember that Noisy Nick war my friend!"

He was walking away the next moment, and Colonel Snowdrop was treating the crowd at the counter, over which he had leaned a few minutes before to hiss a bribe and a threat into the bartender's face.

Within six feet of him lay the body of his victim, and no one any more seemed to take the least notice of the dead. The hard crowd of Red Blade clinked their glasses at the colonel's expense, and he was soon on good terms with all.

At last some one suggested that the corpse of Noisy Nick had best be removed, and a minute later four strong men bore it from the hotel.

In the night without they halted and debated where to take it, and at last decided to carry it to the shanty occupied by Reptile Ralph, who was considered to be the dead man's best friend.

The corpse was accordingly carried thither, the door was opened, and as Reptile Ralph was not present to give any directions, the body was laid carefully on a cot in one corner, and the quartette withdrew.

The shooting did not appear to excite anybody but Reptile Ralph. Men had died before in Red Blade with their boots on, they had fallen before mysterious marksmen, and in fair, open fight; had been lynched for crimes that would not have cost them life in the States, and had died by the quick bowie over the card-table.

Why, then, should Red Blade get excited over Noisy Nick, a man whose braggadocio had made him famous among the Black Hills? He had no permanent home; he did not belong to Red Blade any more than to Deadwood or Custer, and in both of those places he had disgusted crowds with his boisterous calls for a fight.

The four men went back to the Full Deck when they had deposited the sport's body in the little cabin. They had not got enough of Keno Kife's liquor at the colonel's expense, but when they reached the bar-room they found it deserted by all save the bartender himself, who was contemplating several dark stains on the floor.

He told the four that the crowd had just left—gone down to Paradise Phil's, he believed. As for Colonel Snowdrop, he had gone to bed.

For a few moments the men looked wistfully toward the stair, but mentally concluded that it would not be fair to impose further upon good nature and call the colonel up, and by mutual agreement they filed out again, leaving Keno Keifer alone.

"That was the best play I ever saw in Red Blade and I've been hyer ever since the crowd saw its first shanty," remarked the bartender to himself when the tramp of the four had died away. "The colonel forced 'em as cool as an iceberg an' never flinched under Reptile Ralph's ordeal. I observe that when Snowdrop gets the drop somebody tumbles. An' the breaking of that window! Who'd have thought of that? He's no infant. That man reached his majority in cunning years ago."

Keno Kife had barely concluded when a footstep aroused him, and his quickly uplifted eyes saw the man who entered at the front door.

"Reptile Ralph!" murmured the bartender.

The little man had come back, but now his eyes showed no traces of excitement, and Keno Kife had time to note that they were very cool ere nothing but the counter separated them.

"Gone, eh?" ejaculated Reptile Ralph.

"Yes, the boys took him to your cabin."

"Oh, I'm not talking about Noisy. I mean Colonel Snowdrop."

"He's gone to bed."

"Sober?"

"Yes."

"Did he drink every time the crowd did?"

"I think so."

"How often was that?"

Keno Kife reflected and then began to count on his fingers.

"Eight times," he said at length.

"I think he could stand that," said Reptile Ralph. "I want to deal with a sober man."

"What! are you going to disturb him to-night?"

"Yes, now."

"He is the most prominent guest the Full Deck has, and we are bound to let him—"

"See here!" interrupted the little man and his cool eyes showed rising anger in a sudden flash.

"I am here to see Colonel Snowdrop, guest or no guest, asleep or awake. You saw Noisy Nick killed; you say that the bullet that wiped him out first shattered that window pane. If this is true, how is it that there are no footprints under that window an' the ground is rather soft, too, and how is it that there ar' more pieces of glass outside than on the floor? Don't look me in the eye, Keno Keifer, an' say what you solemnly said half an hour ago. Because thar ar' things that prove you the biggest liar in Christendom."

The barkeeper staggered back with the eyes of Reptile Ralph riveted upon him. He tried twice before he spoke.

"I stick to what I've said," were his words.

"Then, by Jericho! I'll bring the colonel down an' prove you a liar!"

Reptile Ralph drew back and turned suddenly toward the stair.

"I've located this man from Custer an' he's the very chap who would shoot Noisy Nick," he cried.

"Halt! throw up yer hands, or by the blood of ther martyrs! I'll play death's ace!"

Reptile Ralph stopped suddenly and drew back. At the same moment one of his hands moved toward his hip, but no pistol flashed in the light.

He was already covered, and that by the man who had arrived in the nick of time, the boss of Red Blade—Dread Don!

CHAPTER V.

THE BLUE-EYED SCHEMER.

It was a tableau that made Keno Keifer smile.

The desperado of Red Blade stood erect in the doorway and looked coolly over the polished barrel that covered Reptile Ralph. The little man thus suddenly checked said nothing but probably bit his lips under the brownish mustache that covered them.

"Goin' up-stairs ter waken ther colonel, eh?" said Dread Don who must have heard the little man's last words. "I reckon you'd better stop whar you ar'! You'd better go an' bury ther carkiss thet'll bray no more in Red Blade. I hear thet they've carried it ter yer shanty, Reptile. Go!"

Dread Don stepped aside, but still held his revolver at Reptile Ralph's head.

"If thar's ter be a hereafter between us, a

settlement for this drop game, I'm yer man," he went on. "But go ter Noisy Nick an' don't try ter disturb ther gent up-stairs. It mightn't be healthy business."

"All right," said Reptile Ralph, his lips scarcely moving as he pronounced the words. "I'll see him later."

He sent a swift glance toward the stairway as he finished, and with his eyes fixed on Dread Don, he walked past the leveled revolver and straight through the door.

"Won't I, though?" he exclaimed, clinching his brown hands, as he walked toward his shanty. "Won't I call somebody ter account for what happened to-night? Bet yer head, old horse!"

Reptile Ralph kept on until he threw wide the door of a small cabin that stood near the western terminus of Red Blade's main street.

"Whar ar' ye, Noisy?" he said, stooping and feeling in the dark. "Oho, I've found yer, old pard. Dead, an' no mistake—killed by a man who is masquerading hyer under a bifalutin' name. I didn't locate him till I had bothered my brains for a solid hour over him. I've got him now, though."

Reptile Ralph rose and lit a small tin lamp, which he took from a rough bracket fastened to one of the logs.

As the light permeated the little cabin, it revealed the motionless figure lying on the cot, showing the little desperado the whitened features of Noisy Nick. He took the lamp and held it over the dead man for several moments of profound silence.

"It grinds me ter the bottom ter see yer thar, Noisy," he suddenly grated. "An' I war checked on my way ter the skunk who did it! I war stopped by Dread Don, who thinks he can do anything because the Cool Clan is at his back. I'm little, but what thar is of me is dynamite!"

He would have continued, perhaps, if the opening of the door had not produced sufficient noise to startle him.

"Hello!" exclaimed Reptile Ralph. "I wasn't lookin' for angels in this shanty."

The answer was a smile, and the visitor came forward.

She was a young girl about eighteen, with a well-rounded figure, a profusion of auburn hair, and a pair of deep blue eyes that did not look very dangerous.

"Don't call me an inhabitant of the better world, Reptile Ralph," she said, looking into the face of the startled tough. "I am of the earth, earthly."

"Whether ye ar' or not, Red Blade is a bad place for beauty like yours—for blue eyes an' such," was the reply. "Ar' you the girl thet came up on the stage?"

"Yes. How did you know Sweet William had a female passenger?"

"News spreads rapidly in Red Blade. You ar', let me see—what do they call you?"

"Ruby Ryan," spoke the girl.

"Here on business?"

"Yes."

The girl spoke the little word with an emphasis that brought her lips firmly together.

"What's your trade?"

"Vengeance!"

"Jehosaphat!" cried Reptile Ralph. "I war just goin' inter business of thet kind myself. Let me show you something, Ruby."

He took the little lamp and was proceeding to the spot where Noisy Nick lay when the hand of the girl dropped upon his arm.

"I know what you would show me," she said. "I have seen him already."

"Dead?"

"Yes, dead."

"Mebbe—no! I know who did it. So you tell me thet yer business in Red Blade is vengeance. That's a big game for a girl ter play here. This is the haunt of Dread Don and the Cool Clan consistin' ov six of the toughest men in the Black Hills. Why you're but a girl, not eighteen yet, eh?"

"Just past," smiled Ruby.

"Jericho! come, tell me, girl. Mebbe you and I can be pards in a game thet 'll suit us both. Noisy won't disturb us for the ball of Shasta Leon wiped him out."

"Shasta Leon!" echoed the girl. "Then you know him by that name?"

"I ought ter."

Reptile Ralph took a three-legged stool and placed it near the rough table that sat against the back wall of the cabin then perching himself upon the table he motioned for Ruby to begin.

"I don't see why I should tell you," she said, "I think I never saw you before to-night."

"Mebbe not, but what difference does that make?"

"A good deal to me, perhaps."

"Oh, well, fight it out then," the tough laughed in a careless way. "If you don't want any help and won't take any when offered I'd like ter know how ye'r goin' ter get along in Red Blade. See here," he leaned forward and put his hand softly on Ruby's arm. "If I'm not mistaken Dread Don war lookin' for you to-night."

The girl smiled.

"I know that," she said. "I am not entirely friendless in Red Blade although it is

the haunt of the Cool Clan, an organization which has obtained some celebrity for courage among the Hills. You didn't think I'd come here unprepared, Reptile Ralph."

"Not exactly, but—"

"I am not friendless here, as I have said," the girl interrupted, calmly. "I came up from Custer in the same stage that brought Colonel Erastus Snowdrop."

"And that infernal box?"

"What box?"

"The one Dread Don opened at Paradise Phil's."

Ruby Ryan slowly shook her head.

"If there was a mysterious box in the stage, I knew nothing of it," she said.

"Wal, thar war," said Reptile Ralph. "It held a human hand, pierced by a dagger."

The girl let slip a little exclamation of surprise.

"Don't you see?" and the hand of the little man tightened on the girl's arm. "Somebody else is playin' a game besides you. The hand an' the dagger came in on the stage that brought you an' the man at the Full Deck. Oh, I want blood for the pard lyin' thar!"

Reptile Ralph sprang up as if a thought of Noisy Nick had just flashed through his mind.

Stepping out from the table he folded his arms, and gazed silently at the unsheathed dead. The girl watched him from the stool she had taken at the wave of his hand, and the wind stirred the door that stood ajar.

"Don't you see?" suddenly cried Reptile Ralph, whirling upon Ruby. "I am liable to interfere with your plans if I start out to avenge Noisy Nick. I'm no Hercules in stature, but I've cut some red swaths in my time all the same. Hadn't you better tell me what brings you ter Red Blade, so thet I will not interfere?"

The girl was silent; her eyes wandered from Reptile Ralph to the corpse on the cot.

"All right. I've left it to you," was the reply. "I'll now proceed ter carry out a compact made with the man lyin' thar."

He said no more, but went to where Noisy Nick lay, and commenced to envelop the body in all the bed-clothes the cabin contained. Having done this, he raised the stool, and broke it against the stout logs, flinging the fragments upon the corpse.

Ruby watched him with absorbing interest. Was the man mad?

Reptile Ralph did not stop until the corpse was entirely concealed. The table had followed the fate of the stool, and the pieces lay thick upon the body of the Black Hills braggart.

All at once the man snatched up the lamp, and approached the pyre with eager steps.

"Merciful heavens! what would you do?" cried the girl, darting forward and clutching his sleeve.

"What I swore I would do for him if he went first," said Reptile Ralph, turning half-way round and giving Ruby a look never to be forgotten. "Years ago, an' miles from this den of mangy coyotes, we pledged each other to cremate the first one to die. Let me do it."

Ruby did not release the sleeve.

"Why not take the body to the mountain?" she said.

"The compact was thet it was ter be burned under a cabin roof," was the retort.

"The fire will doom Red Blade."

"What do I care if it burns the earth ter a crisp?" laughed Reptile Ralph. "I'm goin' ter carry out an oath taken in good faith an' with uplifted hands."

He broke from the girl's grasp and sprang forward. She saw him stoop over the pyre he had built and thrust the lamp toward it. The next instant the edge of the dead desperado's shroud ignited, and Reptile Ralph drew back.

"This is Red Blade's first cremation," he cried, showing Ruby a pair of eyes that twinkled ferociously. "It may not be the last one, though! Look how it burns! If Sweet William had not brought a certain passenger ter camp to-night Noisy would not be thar."

He stepped back to where Ruby Ryan stood and caught her wrist.

"This is no place for you, miss," he went on. "Thar'll be an unpleasant smell and a big fire here in a few minutes. I'm goin' ter stay ter see it fairly under way, but you—you must go."

She was led forward and pushed across the threshold of the cabin. A volume of smoke followed her out and then the door was shut.

"He means to carry out his oath," she said, looking back at the cabin, beyond whose one window she could see the leaping flames. "I could have secured an ally in him, perhaps, but I don't want one of this kind. I am here for vengeance, as the bosses of Red Blade may soon discover. Ah! how the fire burns!"

If Ruby could have seen the interior of the cabin at that moment she would have seen Reptile Ralph watching his work with blazing eyes. With his back to the door and the fire in his face, he was gazing at the funeral-pyre of his murdered pard. The flames had wrapped the whole body and were fast insuring the destruction of the cabin.

They had reached a point at which they were beyond human control.

"Why doesn't the man come out?" cried

Ruby. "It cannot be that he has taken a notion to perish with the body of his pard."

At that moment a footstep startled the girl. "Found at last!" said a stern voice that sent a thrill to the girl's heart. "Does the fool's fire fascinate you, Ruby Ryan?"

She made no answer, but drew back. Her arm was in the clutch of a man who was a handsome athlete, with hair that clung to his broad shoulders. His eyes fairly glistened with savage delight.

"I've been scouring Red Blade for you; whar have you been?" he went on. "Come, my blue-eyed viper. I have you fast! You came up in the same stage that brought your daggered hand. Ah! your mother was a viper before you! And now, after six years, you look into the eyes of Dread Don! Come forward, boys. I've got the snake thet crawled into camp to-night. Cover thet cabin-door, and drive back to his burning pard the man who will attempt to leave by-and-by."

Ruby saw six stalwart men advance from the shadows a few feet away. The next moment their hands went up and in each was a heavy six-shooter.

"The Cool Clan!" ejaculated the girl.

"The invincible six of Dakota!" said Dread Don, with a proud laugh.

At that moment the door of the cabin opened, and the boss of Red Blade straightened as he cried:

"Back to your pard, Reptile Ralph!"

The man in the door uttered a wild oath.

The whole interior of the cabin seemed a mass of flames; the glass of the window cracked as Dread Don spoke.

Reptile Ralph looked coolly into the twelve revolvers that covered him. To go back was to perish in the fire; to move forward was to die before the Cool Clan.

"Let the Clan finish the fool!" said Dread Don to Ruby. "I want to introduce you to a friend of mine."

He started back, with the girl's arm still in his grasp.

"This is Red Blade, and I am king here!" he continued. "My friend thinks you an innocent little angel. We'll find him at the Full Deck, and—"

The desperado's sentence was broken by a loud cry, and the next moment the Cool Clan were firing rapidly at a dark object flying down the street.

There was nobody in the cabin-door!

CHAPTER VI.

THE SENDER OF THE BOX.

At the same moment that witnessed the unexpected escape from the burning cabin a woman who would have attracted attention anywhere entered the hotel in Custer City where the stage office was and walked toward a young man who appeared to be the general factotum of the place. She was regal in her looks, on the shady side of thirty, though she appeared younger, and had eyes that were softly brown and intensely captivating.

"Did the box get off?" she asked the clerk.

"It did, ma'am."

"It will be delivered without fail?"

"Sweet William is pledged to that and that ought to be enough."

"I will consider it so," said the woman, her eyes glowing with delight. "It has reached its destination ere this, and somebody is mystified. Full Hand Frank will report when we meet. He is there."

The last words were not addressed aloud to the clerk of the hotel, nor were they spoken in the office. On the porch the woman muttered them to herself.

"Who is that seraph, Tony?" asked one of the half dozen men who were in the room when the beautiful inquirer made her appearance.

This man must have just come in from the mines, for there was mining dust on his clothes and fresh mud on his boots.

The clerk shook his head.

"You'll have to inquire elsewhere, Shady. We don't keep a general information bureau," he said.

The man called Shady scowled and bit his lip.

"She's a walkin' chromo to be alone in Custer," he said, his eyes wandering beyond the door. "You don't know whar she hails from, eh?"

Tony glanced through his lashes and shook his head.

"Mebbe a fellar kin find out," and the next moment Shady had left the hotel.

From the porch which he reached in three strides he saw the woman and a man on the street.

"Hello! run down a'ready!" he ejaculated and then advancing to the edge of the porch on tiptoe he leaned forward with ears on the alert.

If he had been a little quicker in his movements he would have seen the woman met by the man who had joined her, and he might have heard some strange words.

"Well, it got off on the stage," the woman said.

"I could have told you that," said the man.

"Did you inquire in there about Sweet William's passengers?"

"No."

"I did."

"Ah! well, who were they?"

"A man and a young girl."

"Fellow-travelers?"

"I should say not. The man passed as Colonel Erastus Snowdrop, and before he left he inquired where he would likely find Dread Don."

The woman clinched her hands suddenly but made no audible reply.

"Colonel Snowdrop," repeated the man looking her in the eye. "Do you think that is his name?"

"I don't know. He did not know the girl was going up, you say?"

"I did not say so, but such is the case; he did not know it. The girl was about eighteen, pretty and innocent looking, and had blue eyes."

The listener started slightly at the mention of blue eyes.

"The strange coincidence is that she, too, inquired about Dread Don," continued the man with a smile.

"That young girl with the blue eyes?"

"That young girl!"

The right hand of the woman leaped at the man's arm as if the right hand was a panther.

"Heavens! what importance do you attach to this?" she said in excited tones scarcely above a whisper. "Do you think either of them knew that the box was on the stage?"

"Inquiry has convinced me that neither had the remotest idea of its presence," was the reply. "It was delivered to Sweet William according to your orders, and he carried it under his seat. I have been exacting on this point for when I discovered that the man and the girl were going north, probably to Red Blade, I naturally thought of the safety of the box."

"That was right. It must reach the party for whom it is intended! He must know that the sway of the chief of the Cool Clan is in danger."

The words that fell from the speaker's lips sounded like water falling upon heated iron.

"Now," she went on, "what do you think about the passengers? What about Colonel Snowdrop?"

"Not here, Perdita," he said. "I see a man on the porch; he has just come there and appears to be listening."

The woman threw a mad glance toward the hotel and her eyes seemed to take fire suddenly as she caught sight of a dark figure against one of the wooden columns.

"Woe to the person who listens!" she hissed. "You know, Montez, that I am not to be balked."

"Yes, but let us not excite the man on the porch. He has followed you from the hotel. Come! to the house."

The two walked away followed by a pair of eyes that were full of curiosity.

"That diamond eyed woman is not alone," their owner said. "I didn't leave the mines a minute too soon to-night. Something is going to happen, and if my ears did not deceive me, I heard the name of Red Blade's boss spoken by the man. I'm going to the end of the string accident has put into my hands."

He remained on the porch until the couple had almost vanished. Then, he slipped down and glided away.

Meanwhile the man and woman had walked quietly to a small house, not far from the hotel, and when the door had been shut and a lamp lighted, the latter said:

"Now, go on. I am burning to be at work. Ever since I heard that we have located the man and his new wolves I have been on fire. You were going to tell me about this man called Colonel Snowdrop who went North in the stage. Proceed."

"He's no more whom he pretends to be than I am, Perdita," the man said. "That man Colonel Snowdrop? Not much!"

"Don't torture me; who is he?"

"Shasta Leon, or, to be plainer to you, Gold Gideon, the Frisco Nabob."

"That man?" cried Perdita.

"That man," smiled Montez, who was a handsome man of forty, whose mustache was as dark as his eyes.

"And he went North with the box after inquiring about Dread Don?"

"Yes; he and the girl."

"Ah, the girl! What about her?" exclaimed the woman. "You did not overlook her in your detective work, Montez?"

"No; she is too pretty to be overlooked," laughed the man. "She came up here from the South day before yesterday—from Denver, I think."

"And hid here?"

"I can't say that, only I know that Colonel Snowdrop, alias Gold Gideon, did not see her until they were seated in the stage. That girl inquired three times about Dread Don, about his looks, his coolness and the clan at his back."

"Did she look like a huntress?"

"Yes, despite her blue eyes; but I guess Dread Don and his clan are strong enough to

cope with her. She called herself Ruby; I got a grip on no other name."

Perdita did not reply, but began to walk the room with impatient strides. Her eyes flashed, and her fingers seemed to sink deep into her palms. Montez stood still and watched her.

"The tigress is in another passion," he said to himself. "The most dangerous woman in Dakota, or elsewhere, is in her old mood. If somebody were here now somebody would be killed. I wouldn't play a hand against her for all the gold under ground. She wasn't born to lose. Heavens! her veins will burst."

For several minutes Perdita walked the room with the fury of a tigress that paces her cage eager to tear something to pieces. She had forgotten the man who watched her every movement.

"A girl ahead of me—a girl with blue eyes!" Montez heard her repeat again and again in gasps that seemed to shake her whole frame. "I have found the trail for this! I have reached the hunting ground but to find a blood-hunter ahead of me. A baby, too! I wish I could feel her throat to-night. Would to Heaven I had her here now—now!"

She stopped as she sent forth the last word with all the rage the human voice can sound.

The next moment, as if the whirlwind of passion had suddenly left her, she dropped into a chair and buried her face in her hands.

Montez continued to watch her, but without a word.

Just outside under the stars that were bathing Custer in a flood of golden light a man crouched at the window and held his breath. He had on a dark mining-suit, and there was mud on his high boots.

"This beats more than I expected to see," he muttered. "I have been well paid for playing the spy. I would sooner have a whole pack of half-starved wolves on my track than that woman."

Five minutes passed before Perdita uncovered her face and looked up.

"I knew it," muttered the man at her side. "The cyclone has gone by."

While the dark brown eyes still showed some traces of the terrible passion the woman had displayed they were "on fire" no longer.

She got up and touched her companion on the arm.

"To Red Blade," she said in a calm voice.

"To-night?"

"Now!"

"I thought you wanted Dread Don to lose some sleep over the box and its contents."

"I did, but the girl! We did not take her into the calculation. In the name of Heaven, Montez, who is she?"

The man shook his head.

"One of these unexpected people," he said.

"Unexpected? Yes! My God! why didn't I know when the stage started that it had that young girl for a passenger?"

"She may not be a huntress after all," suggested Montez.

"Ah! she is! She inquired about Dread Don's coolness and his pards, you say. That is enough for me. Did you hear me a moment ago? To Red Blade!"

"It is a long ride."

"You are going to have company."

"That means that that woman is going up there to create a sensation," said the man who was crouched at the window and the next moment he had drawn back without noise. "I happen to know the man against whom this big hand is being played, and I am going to Red Blade, too. Farewell mines, for a spell. Maybe I can rake in a bonanza with very little work. Cool and shrewd as Dread Don is, the two in there have the best of the game so far."

Drawing back still further he suddenly vanished and walked away on tiptoe. Ten minutes later he emerged from the little shed holding the bridle of a well-limbed horse of coal darkness.

"All aboard for the battle-ground," he said in audible tones as he vaulted into the saddle and settled himself there. "If Shady Sam knows himself, he will take a hand in this big game against Dread Don and the Cool Clan!"

"Not if we know ourselves!" exclaimed a voice behind him.

The man on the horse wheeled as if a serpent had hissed and touched his back.

"You stay here; we go to Red Blade!" continued the same voice.

At the same moment a man rose in his stirrups a few feet away. His hand went up and something glittered in it. A quick movement followed, a sudden darting forward of the hand that had shot upward, another glitter in the starlight, and Shady Sam dropped from the horse!

There was no noise. The stroke had been dealt with the swiftness of the lightning, and the horse as if seized with fright darted away with a man hanging from the stirrups.

"The silent force is the best," said a voice followed by a light laugh.

Meanwhile, Shady Sam was being dragged down the main street of Custer, but all at once a giant specimen of the fearless desperado leaped in front of the horse and checked his career.

He caught the animal in front of the hotel

lately left by the miner, and Shady was freed from the stirrup.

"Bring him here," said a voice from the porch.

It was done and a minute later a dozen men looked down in amazement upon a man in whose breast was sticking a dagger with a steel handle like the one found in the embalmed hand!

CHAPTER VII.

SIX MILES FROM RED BLADE.

At first it was believed that the man carried into the hotel from the street was already dead, but a convulsive movement and an attempt to articulate something, convinced the crowd that life still remained.

Half a dozen men with drawn revolvers rushed into the street and looked in vain for the person who had planted the dagger in Shady Sam's bosom. When they came back with an adverse report, they found the wounded man seated in a chair while the terrible cut was being dressed by one who knew something about surgery.

Shady Sam had volunteered no information about the accident, and when asked to do so always shook his head and said that it was his concern, and that he would get even with the person who did it.

"Let him run the boat if he wants to," growled the men of Custer, as they cursed the miner's stubbornness and by and by Shady had barely enough friends left to carry him to the little shanty where he was to be left to die or recover just as fate should decree.

The dagger, at his request, had been taken to the cabin, and when the doctor had left him he turned over and fixed his eyes upon it.

"A little higher and you would have finished me," he said. "I'm goin' to give you to yer owner an' soon at that. I've been down before, an' I always got up—always! The tigress an' her pard an' on their way ter Red Blade ere this an' I'm likely ter get thar after the battle. But I'll be on deck when they rejoice over their victory, an' Shady will show 'em that it takes more than a simple dagger throw ter make a dead ground berry out o' him."

He passed into a deep sleep while he watched the dagger and several hours flitted away.

Custer had almost ceased to discuss the mysterious wounding of the miner, and the hotel was nearly empty when Shady awoke.

The first thing he saw was the dagger where he had seen it last and reaching out his hand he took it with a smile.

"I feel better, as if I had no cut at all," he said. "Doctor Snisher must have put a balm of magic on the wound. Hang me, if I ain't Shady Sam once more!"

He got up with the assistance of a chair and stood erect, put his hand on his breast and felt no pain.

"I'm able to go," he went on. "The devil who launched the dagger at my heart has never seen my iron constitution put to the test. Oh! I've been tried a thousand times!" and he laughed till his words came back with a strange echo.

Shady Sam got his broad-brimmed hat and armed himself, then he left the lamp burning on the bracket above his bed and went out.

He walked strong enough for a man with a dagger wound; he was one of those men who seem to bear a charmed life.

He went to the little shed he called a stable and went in.

A horse greeted him with a nicker, and his hand ran over the smooth neck of the fleetest animal in Custer.

In three minutes he was ready for the ride to Red Blade, he had led the horse into the starlight, and was in the saddle again.

"Thar's no knifer about now," he exclaimed, looking around. "He is on the way ter Red Blade, has a good start ov me, but he must be fast if Thunderbolt doesn't beat him to ther fightin'-ground."

The few loungers at the hotel heard the horse go through the town, but no one thought that he carried Shady Sam. They would have believed first that his rider was the Prince of Darkness.

Custer City was soon left behind, and Shady Sam looking over his shoulder, saw the lights of its various faro dens, then in full blast.

He knew the road to Red Blade; it was also the trail to Deadwood, for the new camp was midway, and he had passed through it on several occasions. As the crow flies, it was about fifteen miles to Dread Don's haunt, but the somewhat tortuous road lengthened the distance.

With a fleet horse like the one ridden by Shady Sam, the camp could soon be gained, and he was certain of making the distance within two hours.

If he was not mistaken, he would meet a stage that was due in Custer from Deadwood that night. There were then no road-agents in the way, the last one had been caught and lynched a few months before by the Cool Clan.

Shady Sam set out on his ride with eagerness. Thanks to Doctor Swisher's skillful treatment, or to his iron constitution, he was inclined to think the latter, he did not even feel the wound he had received. He threw back the

brim of his sombrero and laughed triumphantly when he found Custer well behind him and himself flying over the mountain road to Red Blade.

All at once, in the narrowest part of the trail, he heard the rumble of the stage he expected to meet. The night was clear and cool, and the cracks of the driver's whip rung out like the explosions of pistols.

Shady Sam bit his lips when he was forced to move to one side to let the stage go by. Every moment was precious to him; he imagined the woman Perdita and Montez, her pard, already at work in Red Blade.

He cursed the slowness of the vehicle while he waited, minutes seemed hours.

Suddenly a sound was heard that drew an exclamation of anger from the miner, and the next moment a stentorian "Whoa!" followed by a torrent of oaths, saluted his ears.

The stage no longer rumbled over the trail, and the heavy hoofs of the horses had ceased to make confusion.

"A mishap!—a break-down!" ejaculated Shady Sam. "An' right whar the confounded trail is barely wide enough for the stage. This is mean luck. Why didn't the galoot o' the whip make better time?"

The miner rode forward with the rocky walls of the trail on either side of him, and presently came suddenly upon four stalwart iron-gray horses and a stage which had toppled against the rocks.

A bronzed man in a red shirt, which had a broad, sailor-like collar, was looking under the stage, lantern in hand, and his first intimation of Shady Sam's presence was the voice of that individual himself.

"Hello! broke down, eh? An' in the devil's own place, too."

The driver started back and held up his lantern to get a view of his confronter. Shady Sam leaned forward with anything but a pleased countenance, and wished the Jehu of the mountain trail and his stage in the lake of fire.

"Linchpin out, wheel off, not my fault," said the driver. "Goin' ter Deadwood, eh?"

"No, Red Blade," snapped Sam.

"Time is more than money with me; it may be life itself. Couldn't you have broken down elsewhar?"

"Might hev done it ef I knew you war comin'," was the retort, accompanied by an aggravating smile. "I'm anxious ter reach Custer, an' so's the passenger I've got on board."

"Passenger?" Shady Sam threw a quick glance toward the vehicle.

"Whar is he?"

"Inside."

"Must be asleep. I don't see any passenger in that stage."

"I'm here all the same," called out a strange voice, at the sound of which the miner gave a start. "Are you horseback?"

"Yes."

"What'll you take for the animal?"

"I'm goin' to Red Blade."

"And I must get to Custer."

By this time the passenger had left the stage and stood revealed in the light of the driver's lantern.

Shady Sam saw a large, well-shaped person, about forty, with cool-looking eyes and a heavy mustache that completely hid his mouth.

"We meet for the first time, I believe," said Sam.

"Yes, sir. My name is Snowdrop—Eras-tus—"

"Jehosaphat!" ejaculated Shady Sam, before the man on the ground could complete the name.

"Are you Colonel Snowdrop?"

"I am he," was the reply. "What is my name to you?"

"A good deal, mebbe," said the miner. "I didn't expect to see you this side of Red Blade."

A sudden stride carried Colonel Snowdrop to the miner's horse, and the next moment he was staring into Sam's face.

"You know something. Tell me," he said.

The Custer City miner dropped to the ground beside the colonel, and looked at the astonished driver.

"Watch my horse," he said, and then turned to Snowdrop, whose arm he touched.

"Come out here, colonel," he continued, and the two walked away together.

"I heard your name spoken in Custer to-night, an' if I hadn't heard it, mebbe I wouldn't be hyer," continued Sam. "You have two more names, but mebbe you've discarded 'em."

"I?"

"Yes. Shasta Leon and Gold Gideon, the Frisco Nabob."

Shady Sam spoke the names looking the thunderstruck colonel in the face. He saw a start that confirmed his words; no amount of denial would alter his opinion.

"It doesn't matter, colonel. We never go by our right names in this country," laughed Sam. "Thar isn't half a dozen men in Custer who have a solid grip on my baptismal handle. It's all right, I say, all right; eminently proper, in other words, colonel. Know how it is myself, you see. Shasta Leon an' Gold Gideon! Names

that suggest suthin', I should say, especially ther Frisco one."

"Who said I bore them once?" grated the colonel, whose eyes seemed to blaze.

"A man told a woman."

"In Custer?"

"In Custer, colonel. I happened ter hear; happened ter, you understand."

"Who was the man?"

"A feller called Montez."

"And the woman?"

"He called her Perdita."

There seemed to be a sudden twitching of Colonel Snowdrop's lips, but Shady Sam was not certain; the starlight was not very brilliant. A moment's silence was permitted to slip away.

"What was this woman like?" asked the colonel, in a voice totally unlike the one the miner had just heard.

In a well-worded sentence the miner described the woman he had seen in Custer, the tigress who had forced Montez to ride to Red Blade that night.

"Know her now, eh, colonel?" he ejaculated, at the end of the description. "I've seen women before, but this one has the nature ov a tigress. Jehu! she worked herself up ter a point whar she suddenly collapsed."

"My God! it is the same creature!" parted the colonel's lips. "I am going to her. I will find her in Custer."

"Not to-night," said Shady Sam. "She went to Red Blade."

Colonel Snowdrop's look was a stare.

"To Red Blade?" he echoed. "That woman in Red Blade now?"

"She went thar—with her pard Montez."

"I saw nothing of them."

"I can't help that. I only know that they left Custer bound for Red Blade. They gave me a parter ere they left."

"In what shape?"

"In this."

As he spoke, Shady Sam brought forth the dagger with the steel handle and extended it toward Colonel Snowdrop, who recoiled with a sharp cry at sight of it.

"It is like the one—"

He caught himself, and stared at the weapon.

"Mebbe it's the same one," grinned the miner.

"It cannot be that, but I will not swear that it is not," was the reply. "Did they attempt your life with this dagger?"

"I should say they did," said Shady Sam, through clinched teeth. "The man threw it at my heart, an' missed it a ha'r's breadth."

"The woman can throw daggers, too."

"Then you know Perdita?"

"I think I do. I was going to Custer, not to find her exactly, but on other business. I'll go back, now—back to Red Blade."

Colonel Snowdrop had the expression of a man suddenly rendered desperate. He took two steps toward the stage, stopped, wheeled suddenly, and came back to the man, looking at him with eyes filled with curiosity.

"No; I'll go to Custer first," he said. "You will do an errand for me in Red Blade. Help us right the stage, and I will see that the driver makes up for lost time. It is six miles to Red Blade from this point. You must take a message from me to Dread Don."

Shady Sam did not reply. He knew that Perdita, the tigress, had gone to Red Blade to find the captain of the Cool Clan, but he did not think it essential to tell the colonel so.

"I'll write the message now," continued Snowdrop, and the miner saw him write in the lantern-light, with the broad tire of a wheel for a desk.

CHAPTER VIII.

A DISPUTED WARNING.

HALF an hour elapsed before the combined efforts of the three men succeeded in getting the disabled stage in a condition to move on to Custer.

When all was ready, Colonel Snowdrop took a seat inside, the driver mounted to his box and cracked his long whip over the sharp ears of the lead horses, and the clumsy vehicle moved off.

"Don't forget—the message must get to Dread Don within the briefest possible time!" called out the colonel to Shady Sam, who was eager to resume his journey.

"He'll get it or death'll trump my ace, colonel," was the reply, and the Custer City miner touched his horse with the spurs and was once more on his way.

Six miles to Red Blade!

It would not take Sam long to cover that distance, and he was very anxious to do so, for sharp pains were shooting inward from the dagger-wound like so many arrows, and he was afraid it was going to give him trouble after all.

"I tossed a thunderbolt before Colonel Snowdrop, when I drew a word picture of the woman called Perdita," laughed Sam, thinking of the scene which had just been enacted in the pass near the disabled stage. "I would bet my heart that he has been both Shasta Leon an' Gold Gideon the Frisco Nabob. He would give

his windpipe almost if that female war in Hong Kong or some other outlandish place at this moment. What did he write ter Dread Don? Let me see. The letter isn't sealed."

Shady Sam did not rein in his horse for the purpose of reading the message with which he had been intrusted. He let the lines fall upon the arching neck and took the bit of paper, a memorandum leaf, from an inner pocket. Then he drew a lucifer match across the horn of the sad dleand sheltered the blaze with his hand. He was no time at all mastering the message which was written in peculiar but easily read characters; a moment was enough.

He read as follows while the little match burned swiftly:

"DREAD DON:—

"The living tomb has given up its prisoner. She comes to Red Blade as Perdita; her pard is a man called Montez. The bearer of this has seen them both. I am on the way to Custer for a purpose. She is hunting you—both of us I think. Be on the alert. I have no suggestions to make. You know what to do!"

SNOWDROP."

"That last line means more than the whole letter," said Sam, throwing the match away and folding the paper again. "In other words, it means: 'You must kill the tigress.' Now let us see whether you will do it, Dread Don."

The horse that carried Shady Sam over the mountain road was rapidly approaching Red Blade. The trail had widened and grown smoother.

At last the miner saw a number of lights ahead. The sight drew an exclamation of joy from his lips.

Red Blade at last!

He checked the speed of his horse at the edge of the mountain camp and rode slowly forward.

"I forgot ter inquire whar I'd be likely ter find Dread Don, but I'll not need a directory to hunt him up," he muttered. "Ther boss ov a mountain ranch is never hard to find. Hello!"

He uttered this cry as a man issued from a cabin, and darted across the street ahead of him.

"I say thar—you!"

The man checked himself and turned to Sam, who had reined in his steed.

"Wal, what is it?"

"Whar will I find a man named Dread Don?"

The person addressed came toward the miner, and did not speak until he stood beside the saddle.

"You'll hev ter wait till he comes back, stranger," he said.

"Till he comes back?"

"That war my remark. I think I talk English, but I'm not sartain."

"Whar is Don?"

"Out o' camp."

A singular feeling passed over Shady Sam.

Had Perdita enticed the boss of Red Blade away already? He leaned forward and let his hand drop upon the man's shoulder.

"This is business. I must see Dread Don—now!" he said.

"Wal, you'll wait, I guess."

"What took him from Red Blade?"

"I don't know. I think, though, there was a woman mixed up in it somehow."

"There is, an' one of the most dangerous creatures living!" cried Shady Sam.

"Tell that to ther Clan."

"Whar will I find it?"

"At Paradise Phil's. Turn yer hoss an' ride ter whar you see thet red light," said the man, pointing to a certain lamp seen at a glance. "I'm not a member ov ther gang; I'm a Red Blader, though—Persimmon Paul, slick an' clean."

Shady Sam turned about and rode toward the red light.

At the door of the liquor and gambling den, which was one of the prominent institutions of Red Blade, he dismounted and went forward.

A moment later he was across the threshold, and had taken a brief survey of the interior and its occupants.

Stepping direct to the bar, which at that moment was not very well patronized, he called for a drink and while pouring out the villainous fluid sold for whisky, he leaned over the counter and caught the bartender's eye.

"Show me a member of the Cool Clan," he said in a whisper. "Do it in words, don't point."

Paradise Phil, who was barkeeper himself at that moment, sent a swift glance over the room.

"The big man at the third table from the door. It is Mica Marle, the best o' ther Clan next ter Dread Don himself."

Shady Sam nodded and proceeded to drink off the liquor, then he turned in a careless manner and let his eyes wander to the spot indicated by Paradise Phil.

The third table from the door was occupied by four men at that moment, but it was not difficult to distinguish Mica Marle, for he was the biggest of the lot, and a person who looked of a great deal of importance.

For several moments the miner attempted to catch the desperado's eye from his station at the counter, but failed to do so. Mica Marle was absorbed in the game before him, and it was seen from his expression that he was loser.

"I must have that man's attention," said Shady Sam. "There must be no time fooled away hyer."

He walked toward the third table with his eyes fixed on the man he wanted. All at once he happened to lift his glance; some unseen power seemed to have forced him to this.

"Hal! Montez is hyer!" ejaculated Shady Sam, under his breath. "Whar is the tigress!"

Sure enough, at one of the other tables behind Mica Marle sat the man he had seen with Perdita in Custer. His presence there told Shady Sam that the twain had reached Red Blade.

Montez did not appear to have noticed the Custerite. His long, black lashes shaded his lustrous eyes, and they were studying the cards he held in his velvet hands.

"I'll show him to Mica Marle. I'll set the whole Clan on him, an' we'll beat the pair—the Tigress an' her pard—at their own game!"

The next moment Mica Marle looked up and caught the miner's eye. Shady Sam's look said, "I want you," as plainly as if he had whispered the words over the gambler's shoulder.

A little while afterward the man from Custer stood against his horse in front of the saloon, waiting for Mica Marle. He thought the lieutenant of the Clan had understood his look.

"Won't he never come?" snapped Sam, trying to curb his impatience. "Must I go back—"

No! the man is here.

At that moment the stalwart figure of Mica Marle was seen in the open doorway and the next second he confronted the eager man at the horse.

"You want me, eh?" he said. "I am here."

"I am Shady Sam from Custer. I have just come in, and I am the bearer of a very important message for Dread Don."

Mica Marle stepped aside to let the light of the red lamp over the door fall upon Sam's face. Then he held out his hand.

"I'll take the message," he said.

"It was to be delivered to Dread Don," said Sam hesitating.

"He will get it. He isn't in camp just now."

"So I've heard. He has been decoyed away by a real tigress whose pard sits in yonder," and Sam pointed toward the saloon.

"The girl's pard?" ejaculated Mica Marle. "Did Ruby Ryan the blue-eyed beauty have a pard in camp?"

"Heavens! I'm talkin' about one woman, you're thinkin' about another," cried Sam. "I mean the one who came to Red Blade to-night from Custer."

"Hol! did one come?" exclaimed Marle.

"Yes. Her pard is in yonder—the half Mexican with the long black mustache. They came up together with the avowed purpose of playin' a cool game against Dread Don. I'll give you the message. Sent by Colonel Snowdrop. Here it is. Read it an' be quick. You will understand the underscored words as well as Don."

Mica Marle took the paper which the miner extended and unfolded it. Then he went toward the light nervously watched by the man at the horse. He mastered the message in a few moments and then threw a quick look into the saloon.

"What will he do?" thought Shady Sam. "It all depends on him."

All at once Mica Marle wheeled and came back.

"That message isn't worth the paper it is written on," he said to Sam's consternation. "Why not?"

"Because the person mentioned first in it moldered back to dust years ago. I happened to know!"

Shady Sam could not speak for several moments. The message two men had deemed of the utmost importance was put into his hand again.

"Colonel Snowdrop didn't think so," he stammered.

"The colonel be hanged!" flashed Mica Marle. "I'd hate to risk his judgment in a case of life and death. I won't bother about hunting Dread Don up to deliver a paper like that. If Snowdrop doesn't look out, they'll corral him for a lunatic in Custer."

"But I know something, as that message says," persisted Sam. "I played spy a little in Custer to-night—"

"You did?"

"Yes."

"I don't listen to spies! It's a mean business! I suppose you dogged somebody's footsteps and overheard some talk that was not intended for your ears. Very well; keep it, or retail it out to Dread Don when he turns up."

Mica Marle stepped back while the miner scowled and shut his hands.

"Take the consequences then!" he hissed, following the lieutenant of the Cool Clan with a mad look. "I've done my duty as far as it can be done to-night. I tell you for the last time, Mica Marle," he raised his voice, "I swear that the Mexicanish gambler in yonder came here to-night with a woman who is sworn against Dread Don and his pards."

"The woman who has had no existence for years!" laughed the Red Blader over his broad shoulder. "By Jerusalem! if you stay in camp

and persist in such statements I'll show you what mettle the Clan is made of!"

That was all. There was a threat in the last sentence that made Shady Sam grind his teeth, and for a moment he measured strength with the stalwart tough.

"Go! and may Perdita show you that she is flesh and blood!" he cried.

Sam clutched the bridle madly and led his horse away, while Mica Marle went back into Paradise Phil's.

The big Red Blader walked straight to the man called Montez by Sam and tapped him lightly on the shoulder.

"Pardon me, stranger," he said. "We don't hold an inquisition in Red Blade, but may I ask your name?"

A faint smile came to Montez's face and his dark eyes twinkled with cool good nature.

"Certainly. My name is Montez, and I hail from New Mexico at large."

Mica Marle started slightly. The answer confirmed Sam, at least as to the name.

"Montez, eh?" he echoed, and then lowering his voice he continued. "It is said that you came to Red Blade to-night with a woman who is sworn against Dread Don and the Clan?"

"Is that so?" asked Montez, coolly.

"I have just heard it."

"I'd like to see the galoot who has such a fertile imagination. Shoot me for a rattler if I wouldn't!"

Mica Marle looked abashed.

CHAPTER IX.

THE EFFECT OF A NAME.

To look down into the eyes of Montez as they appeared while he answered Mica Marle one would not think that he was deliberately lying.

He had acknowledged that he was Montez, but, as for his coming to Red Blade with a woman named Perdita, he laughed that down.

"He admits the Montez part of Shady Sam's charge, but sneers at the other," said Mica Marle to himself. "We'll let this matter rest till the captain comes back."

"Anything else?" asked Montez quietly.

"I guess not."

The man went back to his cards, and the next moment was coolly playing as though no interruption had occurred.

Mica Marle walked away and eyed him covertly for a few moments, then left the saloon.

"Hang me, if I like it altogether," he muttered. "Why would Shady Sam persist in saying that he came here with a dangerous female—a tigress he calls her—if he did not? As for the living tomb giving up its captive as Snowdrop says in his message—fudge! I don't gulp that down. Dread Don went off with a female, but with the blue-eyed one. Ruby Ryan played against the wrong man. The colonel insisted that a creature with blue eyes was always an angel, but the captain shook his head and informed Snowdrop that he was running Red Blade, as he is. We propose to keep the bonanza we have struck, and when we get ready to open 'er out, Deadwood and Custer will be nowhar!"

Nobody heard Mica Marle's words, but all the time he was watched by a pair of eyes that beamed with strange eagerness.

The reader will recollect the attempt made by Reptile Ralph to cremate the corpse of Noisy Nick who fell before Colonel Snowdrop's revolver in the bar-room of the Full Deck Hotel. He will recall the sudden appearance of Dread Don and the Cool Clan on the scene, Ruby Ryan's capture by the former, and afterward Reptile Ralph's sudden break for liberty.

The fire which threatened the destruction of the cabin contented itself with consuming the braggart's corpse. It charred the adjacent logs, but did no material damage, and an hour after Reptile Ralph's escape, for escape he did, thanks to his agility, the interior of the shanty was dark and had a disgusting smell.

The person who eyed Mica Marle looked from the partly open door of Ralph's cabin, and if the lieutenant of the Cool Clan could have looked across the threshold, he would have seen a heavy revolver clutched in the bronze hand that hung at the man's side.

In a word, Reptile Ralph had come back, and once more occupied his old quarters. He had stolen back for a purpose; he wanted to avenge the death of Noisy Nick, and the man who had departed for Custer City was the person he was most anxious to meet.

Nobody knew the workings of the Cool Clan better than Reptile Ralph. In the first place, he had never been made a member of that organization, and secondly, he never liked Dread Don. He had ferreted out enough to know that the Clan was guarding a bonanza of some kind, for it was evident that Dread Don would not have settled down at Red Blade for nothing.

In short, Reptile Ralph had spent much time during the several years immediately preceding our story in playing the spy. Greedy for gold, like thousands of the desperadoes who live wretchedly in the far West, he had given himself to the secret hidden by the Clan.

a pard in the hunt in Noisy Nick, and while that unfortunate man had gained notoriety in three camps, he had dogged the footsteps of the seven sports with a pertinacity that commanded success.

What maddened Reptile Ralph was that Noisy Nick should be brutally shot by a man who had just appeared on the scene. He had no positive evidence that Colonel Snowdrop had killed his pard, but circumstances loomed up against him. The broken glass, the absence of foot-tracks under the window where the ground was soft, and the fact that Colonel Snowdrop was Shasta Leon one of Noisy Nick's pards in Jordan Valley—all these things told Reptile Ralph that Nick had fallen by the colonel's bullet.

Reptile Ralph had remained several hours from Red Blade after his escape from the fire, and the revolvers of the Clan. During that time Colonel Snowdrop had gone to Custer on "important business," and Montez and the tigress had reached camp. During the same time Dread Don had conducted Ruby Ryan to the Full Deck and thence to the room occupied by the colonel.

After the expiration of half an hour during which time Keno Keifer the clerk and bartender heard a young girl's voice in tones of denunciation, Dread Don came down-stairs, his hand clutching Ruby's wrist and his eyes glowing like coals of fire. Keno could not think when he had seen the desperate captain of the Clan look so triumphant.

"Something's goin' to happen," muttered the bartender as the couple passed from the hotel. "Thet girl, whoever she is, is in a trap thet has closed on her for good."

If Reptile Ralph had seen Dread Don lead the young girl from the hotel, he would have followed if the surveillance had cost him his life. There was no one to follow, however, and Shady Sam had heard the only report made by the Clan as to Dread Don's movements—that he had left Red Blade with Ruby.

What had been the fate of the young girl who had ventured upon such dangerous territory?

Time might tell even if the Cool Clan never spoke.

To go back, Reptile Ralph saw Mica Marle proceed down the street and in a few moments the Clan's lieutenant had passed from sight.

After awhile the dead man's pard glided from the cabin and went toward the hotel. He looked up at the window of the room lately occupied by Colonel Snowdrop, but it was dark.

The door of the office and bar was open, however, and he saw Mica Marle drinking alone at the latter.

"That man's best friend is always himself!" murmured Reptile Ralph, while he watched the drinker.

A moment later a heavy footstep struck the Red Blader's ears, and Mica Marle had a companion.

Dread Don!

Reptile Ralph started when he saw the leader of the Clan join his lieutenant. He had come back although Ralph did not know as yet that he had been away.

Noisy Nick's comrade crept forward again, his eyes fastened on the two men. Presently they came out and Reptile Ralph hugged the rough weatherboarding of the Full Deck between two dark windows. He let one of his hands glide to the butt of a six-shooter, for he knew that at discovery he would have to fight; late events in Red Blade had made him the Clan's branded outlaw.

"What think you, cap'n?" said Mica Marle, in tones that reached the watcher's ears. "A spinner of first-class cock-and-bull stories has come to camp. And with the darnedest lay-out too."

"What is it?"

"He says that Dora is in Red Blade."

Dread Don received this statement with a start that did not escape Reptile's eyes.

"Who brought that news?" he exclaimed.

"Shady Sam, of Custer City. He had it in black and white from the colonel, whom he met on his way hyer. Snowdrop must be a licensed fool, for you know, cap'n, and so do I, that the cage we made for her never lets out a bird!"

Dread Don was silent for a moment, then he suddenly extended his hand.

"Give me the message," he said.

"I gave it back to the bearer; its absurdity was too much for me."

"Whar is the man?"

"What! Do you take any stock in the report?" exclaimed Mica Marle. "Do you think that one who must have crumbled to dust years ago, is hyer—in Red Blade—in the flesh? Whar is your head, Dread Don?"

The captain of the Cool Clan laughed.

"I would probably have received this message in the same spirit you did, had it come a few days ago," he said. "You have not forgotten the mysterious boy that came to-night—the boy that held the hun in hand pierced by a steel-inch dagger?"

What use a dagger like that

t—"

"Hear me through," interrupted Dread Don. "In this age nothing is impossible. The stage up from Custer brought the box, our old pard and a young girl. The latter came for vengeance; the box meant war to the knife. I have dealt with the blue-eyed seraph, as the colonel calls her. The box has been stolen from his room at the hotel—hand and all."

"The devil!" ejaculated Mica Marle. "Did the girl—"

"No, the girl did not take it," said Dread Don, with a smile at his comrade's eagerness. "It was taken before the woman Dora came, if she is here. Where is the man who wanted to fight Noisy Nick at Paradise Phil's to-night—the young stranger, who called himself Full Hand Frank?"

Mica Marle shook his head.

"I don't think I've seen him since," he said.

"Who has? I don't say that he knows whar the daggered hand is, but I say that we don't want that man in Red Blade at this time."

"That's enough," said Mica Marle, through clinched teeth. "He goes before morning, or if he is hyer, then 'twill be as the Clan's victim."

"Now, show me the man who came up from Custer with the strange news."

"I can't do that, cap'n, although he may be in camp; but I can give you a peep at the person who is said to have come with her."

"Do it! Let me see him!" grated the boss of Red Blade.

Reptile Ralph saw Mica Marle clutch his leader's arm, and give him a startling look.

"In the first place, Don, and before we move a step, tell me one thing: Is the bonanza secret safe?" he asked.

"It is, if we win the fight," was the answer.

"Has it been discovered?"

"Yes."

Mica Marle dropped the desperado's arm and let slip an oath as he started back.

"Show me our enemies!" he cried. "Show the Cool Clan the foe we have to meet to keep the bonanza. Is it Full Hand Frank—is it the woman who is called Perdita, and said to be Dora—is it all combined?"

Reptile Ralph leaned forward to catch the reply.

"It is the clutch of the daggered hand!" said Dread Don. "You know, Mica, that we stand over the biggest bonanza the eyes of man ever looked on. The secret of its existence cost us cool work long ago and far from Red Blade. We must defend the secret now, but that is not all. We are hunted by those who have recorded an oath for blood on the books of the eternal world!"

"And the colonel, too?"

"Yes, he with the rest, for he must be treated with the rest of us, although he saw Red Blade for the first time to-night. I am ready now. Show me the man who is said to have come with the woman from Custer!"

The two men left Reptile Ralph a dark and motionless statue between the two windows.

"I'm on the threshold of the bonanza at last!" he said. "It is underneath Red Blade. I thought as much at one time a year ago, but abandoned the idea. Who is this woman whose very name startles the coolest men in Dakota? If she has come hyer to find the bonanza, she must look out for Reptile Ralph. I'd give a thousand if Noisy Nick war alive. May Satan get the man who shot him down."

Meanwhile Dread Don and Mica Marle were hastening toward Paradise Phil's place, where the lieutenant of the Clan had left Montez. Dread Don's expression was one of eagerness.

"In the name of all that's holy can it be that she is alive and on the trail?" he muttered. "I have fixed the blue-eyed huntress. She knows that beauty and youth soften not the heart of Dread Don. There was a time when I would have knelt at the feet of her mother, but now I take delight in caging forever the young bird. She captivated the colonel, but his pleadings could not touch me. I don't let a viper escape when I can crush it. He would, the fool!"

Paradise Phil had just looked at his watch and noted that it was midnight when Dread Don and his right bower entered the saloon.

The next moment the crack of a pistol was heard, and the captain of the Cool Clan staggered forward to be caught by half a dozen men before he reached the floor!

In an instant the place was a scene of confusion; men sprung up from the tables and revolvers were drawn as six giant fellows formed a ring about Dread Don.

"Shut the door!" thundered some one, and it closed with a bang.

"Now, cover that man yonder," continued the same voice, and the dark hand of Mica Marle singled out a man who stood at one of the numerous card-tables.

The six men, including Mica himself, obeyed the command and Montez found himself gazing into the deadliest weapons in the Black Hills.

"The shot came from the outside, Mica," said some one.

"Never mind that," was the reply. "The finger that touched the trigger was guided to Red Blade by that man! Throw up your hands, Montez."

CHAPTER X.

MONTEZ ON TRIAL.

"HANDS up!" repeated Marle after the interval of a second. "This is Red Blade, Montez, and we do business on the square."

Montez knew that to refuse to obey the command the second time repeated would be to have opened upon him the revolver battery clutched by the hands of the Cool Clan. He did what any sensible man would do under like circumstances; he threw up his hands.

At that moment Dread Don, who had been held by several men since the unexpected shot, started convulsively and looked up.

His face seemed a mass of blood, and amid it all blazed his two keen eyes.

"We have corraled the shooter's pard, cap'n," said Mica Marle as he reached Dread Don's side.

"Ther shooter herself wouldn't be hard to catch. It war a close call, but thar's blood in you yet."

"More than any living creature will ever spill!" grated Don. "The bullet must have broken a vein 'longside my head. Whar is your prisoner?"

Once more the boss of Red Blade stood erect and as he stepped forward a wild cheer burst from the throats of the Clan.

"Aha! I see him!" suddenly ejaculated Dread Don as he caught sight of Montez. "This is the man who came up with the tigress, eh? You are Montez, so called."

The two men stood face to face in a ring formed by the denizens of Red Blade. They were perfect specimens of physical manhood, Montez the little darker of the two, but Dread Don the handsomer perhaps.

Hardly three feet separated them, and if any one ignorant of the circumstances of their meeting had seen them in that attitude, he would have set them down for modern gladiators.

"Montez, so-called? No. I am Montez!" said the man from the South, giving Don look for look, with interest added.

"Came up with a woman?"

"You have said so."

"No insolence!" flashed the boss of Red Blade. "A man like you, Montez, knows the code of the Hills. I need not inform you that this is Red Blade. You need not ask these men who is boss here. You have seen the life of the boss attempted, Mica Marle says by the woman you guided hither. What is your answer?"

The figure of the New Mexican seemed to gain another inch in stature, and he threw a quick look round upon the crowd.

"Is this a court?" he asked.

"It is the only court Red Blade knows," said Mica Marle. "It is the court of the Cool Clan!"

"Say, somebody wants to come in!" called out the man who stood with his back to the door that led into the street.

"Man or woman?" asked Dread Don.

"I don't know."

The circle broke as the Clan's chief stepped forward and covered the door with a six-shooter.

"Open the door," he said, in cool tones.

The next moment there stepped into the saloon a man who was greeted with an exclamation by Mica Marle.

"Shady Sam!" he cried. "Thar's the man who fetched ther news from Custer, cap'n."

Dread Don lowered the revolver and invited the astonished miner forward.

"I came almighty nigh bein' too late," he said, with a look at Mica Marle, who had discredited the double warning with such vehemence. "I guess ther next time you'll take some stock in Shady Sam."

Dread Don had stepped to the Custerite's side, and as he concluded, his hand fell heavily upon his shoulder.

"Face that man yonder," he said, covering Montez with the other hand. "Tell the court who he is."

"Court! Is this a court?" stammered Sam.

"It is the reign of justice in Red Blade!" was the quick retort. "Now, go on. That man is—"

"Montez," finished the miner.

"You saw him in Custer?"

"Yes."

"With a woman?"

"With a tigress called Perdita. I ought to know him. He gave me something before I left."

"What was that?"

Shady Sam produced the dagger, and the whole crowd instinctively leaned forward, all save Montez; he did not stir.

The steel-handled weapon seemed to have a peculiar fascination for the boss of Red Blade, for he eyed it for some seconds before he spoke.

"You are certain it did not come from the woman?" he asked at last.

"I am. I saw Montez launch it at my heart; he was ten feet away and it came like a bullet. Jupiter! it wasn't his fault that I didn't get it where he aimed."

Montez, for the first time, bit his lips, and his eyes said:

"No, it was not my fault, Shady Sam."

"Go on," said Dread Don to the miner.

"What passed between Montez and this woman before they left Custer?"

"She came here to find you."

"And the Clan?" broke in Mica Marle.

"And the Clan. He may stand thar and look contradictory if he wants to, but I know," cried Sam.

Dread Don leaned forward and touched the miner's arm.

"Did you hear him call her Dora?" he asked eagerly.

"No."

"Nothing but Perdita?"

"That is all."

Shady Sam stepped back when he was questioned no further, and suddenly put his hands to his heart.

"I've got those arrow-like pains again!" he said in a low, grating voice to the man nearest him. "I had 'em on ther road hyer. They come from the dagger throw of that sallow devil from Tartarus!"

He almost rushed to the counter and called the bartender in a loud voice.

"Give me something—quick!—an' I'll play a hand thet'll surprise you all!"

"Not while the court is in session," was the reply.

Sam turned away with a sound that would have passed for the growl of a tiger.

"Gentlemen," he said in a voice that instantly engaged the attention of the whole crowd. "I claim the right to exercise the right of private vengeance. There is an unwritten law of blood for blood, blow for blow. I am on the edge of the unseen land from which no pards come back. Whether I fight or sleep, my checks will be cashed at death's counter before mornin', and Shady Sam will have passed the portals of ther Beyond!"

He stopped and staggered back, but caught himself. His face had received a new degree of pallor.

"Court or no court," he went on, "law or no law, I have a right to that man before the Cool Clan or any other organization! He shed my blood; I must shed his. He has given me my death-wound; he belongs to Sam of Custer City. Stand back! My desire to warn Dread Don fetched me to Red Blade with death tugging at my heart-strings. I came hyer, too, to kill that man if I found him, and that I have done."

The desperate miner seemed to have armed himself with new strength, for he stepped back steadily and threw up a hand that gripped a revolver.

"Give me a chance!" he cried, glancing at the crowd. "Give Montez one, too, if he wants it; but in God's name let him be quick."

The pards of Red Blade appeared thunder-struck. They saw a man who showed no wound, yet who acknowledged that he was at the doors of death. They noticed the wild, tiger-like light that danced in the miner's eyes, and they saw the revolver that covered Perdita's pard.

"Give the man a chance," said somebody in the circle.

By common consent it was admitted that "the man" was Montez, and the crowd drew back.

"I give him that," said Dread Don, whose quick ears had caught the words. "The Court dissolves for the time. Draw your revolver, Montez. Face that man!"

The handsome desperado from the south looked into Shady Sam's face and smiled.

"Draw!" said Dread Don. "This thing can't go on all night."

"Draw, or I'll shoot!" came over the miner's pistol.

Montez let his hand drop and the next moment it caught the butt of an elegant silver-mounted six-shooter which was cocked with a distinct click as it came in sight.

He raised the weapon slowly and looked steadily at Sam. Dread Don took off his sombrero, stained with his own blood, and held it between finger and thumb.

"Ready, all!" said the boss of Red Blade, solemnly.

The silence that followed the two words was startling; it was broken again by Dread Don's voice:

"I count three, gentlemen. At the word 'three' you will open the ball, but I want to say that the Court of Red Blade reserves the right to try the survivor if it sees fit."

"I agree," came over the white lips of Shady Sam.

"Now, hyer we go! One—"

The miner was seen to clutch his revolver anew; a tremor perceptible to all passed over his frame.

"Hold on!" cried some one.

"No! go on!" exclaimed Shady Sam, bracing himself anew. "I am worth a dozen—dead—men—yet!"

He staggered back as he gasped out the last sentence, tried to recover himself, even started forward with his eyes fixed on Montez and his teeth well-set, but in vain!

The men who reached him first, kept him from striking the floor, and while they held him up, the unexploded pistol slipped from his hands and he was dead!

"Death counted faster than I," said Dread

Don, smiling as he looked at the astonished crowd, and then at Montez who stood erect, waiting as it were, for the signal. "You know what I said last," he went on, addressing the New Mexican. "This court is in session again."

There was no response for a moment, then Montez took one step toward the Red Blade boss.

"Try me!" he said, fastening his eyes on Don. "Set the infernal machinery of your infamous Cool Clan court in motion against me. Try the prisoner while you have him before you. I am in your power, but behind me is a force against which all the games played by Dread Don and his Clan will amount to nothing."

"The woman, eh?" said the desperado sport. "You threaten us with the vengeance of the tigress called Perdita?"

Montez straightened and laughed.

"Try me!" he said. "I am here!"

"Try him!" cried a dozen voices.

"Noose him without a trial!"

As if goaded to action by a sudden impulse of madness the men of Red Blade encroached on the cool man's ground.

It was a thrilling moment in the life of Montez.

"Make a sieve out o' the half-Greaser!" became the cry.

"Not to-night," dropped from the New Mexican's lips, and the next instant he cleared the little distance between him and Dread Don.

It was the attack of a thunderbolt as it were, the unexpected leap of a Bengal tiger!

Dread Don was in the hands of the leader before he could lift a weapon. He was clutched at the throat by a pair of velvet hands which, as they suddenly closed, became a vise of steel.

The men shrunk back with horror. To shoot at Montez might be to kill Dread Don.

They saw the chief of the clan dragged toward the door which stood open; they saw the two men on the threshold for a moment, then Dread Don was sent spinning toward his Clan. A second had seen the tigrish work begun and ended. Montez was gone!

"Look yonder!" cried some one, and all saw about the door in a circle of light a huge hand transfixed with a dagger!

CHAPTER XI.

DREAD DON'S BITTER FOE.

THE hard crowd started back as if all had been seized with the same impulse, and glared and stared at the object still shown above the door.

The circle of light was about two feet across and in the center was the ghastly hand-dagger pierced and terrible.

Dread Don kept his feet despite the force with which he was hurled back from the door by Montez and he with the rest saw the apparition.

"It is an infamous lie. That hand shall not accomplish its work. I defy it hyer!"

Whipping out a six-shooter as the last words rung from his lips the boss of Red Blade sprung forward and covered the hand. As he touched the trigger the circle disappeared, and when the bullet shivered the board there was no daggered hand for it to pierce.

"Montez! Montez! Shall the half-Greaser get away?" cried a dozen men and there was a rush for the door which was flung open and the sports of Red Blade poured pell-mell into the street.

"What do you say now?" said a voice at Dread Don's ears and at the same time a hand touched his sleeve.

The desperado looked around and saw Mica Marle at his side.

"Cunning as a fox and as strong as a lion," was the reply; "but if he had the strength of fifty lions an' the cunning of a troupe of foxes, he should not outwit us. He came with the woman; there is no doubt of it now."

"With Dora?"

"Yes. She is Perdita now, I believe."

"Then you still believe that the cage has given up its bird?"

"I must believe it. You saw the hand in the box and the fac-simile over the door?"

"I did."

"That settles it with me," said Dread Don through grating teeth. "The bullet that scraped my skull came from her revolver. We have got to play a part of the old game over. Do you hear this, Mica?"

The lieutenant of the Cool Clan nodded.

"The next time I will do better," Dread Don heard him say as their eyes met. "There shall be no caging from now on, nothing but quick work and sure."

"You suit me exactly, Mica," smiled the desperado. "The Clan must know that this is the standing order—'Quick work and sure!' In the first place, we must corral this tigress that came up from Custer to-night; after that Montez and the man called Full Hand Frank. Come to me at the Full Deck in an hour. We might as well play the night out."

The two men parted and Dread Don walked to the hotel where, with a significant glance at Keno Keifer he passed to the little room lately occupied by Colonel Snowdrop.

Of course the room had been deserted by the colonel when important business called him sud-

denly to Custer and Dread Don found himself the only occupant of the place.

In a few minutes the barkeeper of the Full Deck came in and was waved to a stool which he took and waited for the boss of Red Blade to proceed.

"I want to give an order, Keno," said Dread Don.

"All serene. Sail in, captain."

"I want gotten up for me between now and three o'clock a good substantial breakfast."

"With liquor, of course," said the bartender, as if the sport had forgotten the most important part of the meal.

"Not a drop," said Dread Don. "Hold! I want enough eatables prepared to last one person twenty-four hours."

Keno Keifer's look became an amusing stare.

"You will go to work and have this order filled, and left for me in a large basket at the bar," continued Dread Don.

"But the cook, captain, is not in just now, and heaven only knows where he is to be found. I regret to say—"

"You have cooked yourself, Keno," was the interruption. "You graduated in a hash factory in Frisco before you struck Red Blade. Ah! you see I am somewhat familiar with your illustrious past. Do not omit to fill the order, because the chef of this establishment is not on hand. I want it in the basket, subject to my wishes, at 3 A. M. You understand, Keno?"

The barkeeper certainly did, and as he rose to go, the boss of the camp continued:

"It is not to be known that I have given this order," he said. "You will fill the basket secretly, and to the best of your ability."

"Yes."

"If anybody noses about the kitchen, remember that the victuals being prepared are not for me."

"Of course not."

A smile came to Dread Don's lips, as Keno Keifer withdrew, and left him alone once more.

"I don't intend to starve my bird," he said, in audible tones. "Nor do I expect to throw open the cage doors for awhile yet. She played into my hands when I did not expect to see her, and I will see that she remains there. So Dora is back, the last person I expected to see here at this stage of the game, and the last woman I want to meet. If the colonel, old fool, knew that she was in Red Blade, why didn't he fix her, for he has as much to fear from her as I have. No! he must put off for Custer to find evidence to prove that Ruby Ryan, of the blue eyes, is one of the sweetest creatures in the world. Blue eyes are deadlier than black! I have a right to say so, for I carry the evidence here!" and the sport struck his breast with his right hand. "Colonel Snowdrop—deuced fancy name, that—said he would rejoin me at the end of five years. I had hoped that he wouldn't put in an appearance, but hyer he is, and I am bound to him by obligations that must be canceled."

The man paused abruptly, for there was a sound on the stair. It was not the footstep of Keno Keifer, for that worthy had doubtless locked up the establishment, and sought the kitchen, where he would proceed to prepare the eatables ordered.

Dread Don got up and took a step toward the door. The silence that pervades the death-chamber had followed the sound heard, and with one hand on the latch and the other at the butt of a revolver, he waited for a repetition.

It was nearly time for Mica Marle to join him in that very room, but the noise had told him that it had not been made by the heavy boots of his trusted right bower.

For several minutes Dread Don listened, ready to fling wide the door.

"Hang it all! it was something!" he ejaculated. "Woe to the prowlers and spies that fall into my hands while I am fighting for the bonanza under Red Blade! I'll see who is the prowler now."

He jerked the door open as he uttered the last word and leaned forward pistol in hand. The stairs lay at his feet, and the light behind him showed them but dimly, and that but half-way down.

Dread Don looked his keenest look, but saw nothing. The shadows lay thick at the bottom of the steps, and even his shrewd vision could not penetrate them. For all this he was not ready to admit that his ears had deceived him. He stepped back and grasped the lamp with which he moved forward.

"Hello! I see you!" he suddenly exclaimed again.

At that moment there was a movement at the foot of the stairs, and the next instant the boss of Red Blade was looking into a face revealed by the very lamp he held.

"Not a move, Dread Don!" came up the stair. "I am here to see the man I have not seen since—you know when! Utter a word, lift a hand, and I will drive a bullet through your head!"

The desperado sport bit his lip and hissed forth an oath of rage. He was completely covered by a revolver that had a deadly glitter in the lamp-light, and behind it was a pair of eyes that possessed the deadliest cunning.

No stalwart desperado faced the captain of the Cool Clan; he did not look down in to the eyes of a man his physical equal, he would have laughed derisively if he had. He saw beneath him firmly planted on the first step a woman whose figure was molded grace itself and whose face was very beautiful!

"After six years she has found us," said Dread Don to himself. "The colonel was right when he said that the captive of the living tomb was alive."

The next moment the woman began to ascend the stairs. She came slowly up with her revolver still at the desperado's head and her fingers close to the trigger.

"Go back into the room, but always face me," she said. "I am here to see you, Dread Don. After six years we have met on ground of your own choosing."

Obedying her orders, the chief of the Cool Clan moved back into the little room and placed the lamp on the table. Quick as he was, he knew he was not quick enough for the woman who had found him out.

Where was Mica Marle? It was almost time for the right-bower to put in an appearance.

"Sit down, Don," said the woman, as she gained the threshold, and the Red Blader gave her the flashings of his dark eyes and obeyed.

"It is your drop," he said, looking across the little table that separated them. "It is the second one you've had to-night."

"What's that?"

"The second one, I say," said Dread Don, and a quick movement of his hand showed her the bandage that encircled his head. "You tried your hand at shooting at Paradise Phil's awhile ago."

"If No, Dread Don."

"You didn't give me this?" cried the desperado sport.

"That is what I say. When I shoot, there will be no hand of yours to point out the track of the bullet. If the person who gave you that wound had killed you, I would have become your avenger. Would not that have been strange, Don?"

"Devilish strange," said the sport.

"You were not looking for me, eh?" the woman went on.

"I knew you were somewhere near."

She started.

"You couldn't get out of Custer without having some one to post me," said Dread Don, with an air of victory. "You came hyer with a man named Montez. You were preceded by another person whose sole business was to inform me that you were at large."

"He did it, but still I find you alone in a little room in the Full Deck, and not on the hunt. Let me go on, Dread Don." She waved her hand to command silence, and went on:

"Six years ago there were two of us. To-night there is but one. Six years ago there were pleadings and tears for mercy; to-night there shall be none. I look into the same eyes that laughed at tears and clasped hands six years ago far from the mountain den you have established here. Have I changed, Dread Don?"

"Not much," muttered the captain of the Cool Clan.

"You would have known me?"

"Among thousands."

The woman laughed.

"I came to Custer City as Perdita," she went on, "but here I am Dora. I throw off the mask in your presence, Dread Don. You are all here, they tell me. In fact, I have seen the right-bower you had then, now called Mica Marle. I know that the last stage up from Custer brought the other old pard, Gold Gideon, the Frisco Nabob, now rejoicing in the fantastic name of Colonel Snowdrop. I regret that he is not here in this room. The wolves have gathered in this Dakota den, Dread Don. What have you done with the blue-eyed avenger who came up in the stage with the colonel?"

The Dakotan started slightly.

"We don't take account of blue-eyed seraphs here," he said. "Did one actually come to Red Blade with Snowdrop?"

Perdita looked deep into the sport's eyes before she made any response. Was he playing another game?

"She came in the stage," she said, at length.

"Why didn't she pay her respects to me, then?" laughed the boss of Red Blade. "I feel slighted. I must hunt her up and tell her so."

There was no sign in his voice that he had captured the girl with blue eyes, and that he and he alone knew where Ruby Ryan was at that moment.

"Let the child go," said Perdita suddenly. "You have found the bonanza, Dread Don. Are you satisfied?"

"We ought to be."

"Always 'we!'" smiled Perdita. "That means the Cool Clan and its friends."

"Yes, it takes us all in," was the answer, and Dread Don leaned suddenly across the table and flashed the light of his dark eyes upon the woman.

"Your infernal hand told me that when you came you would try to win a game that can be won by no woman living!" he went on. "It

wasn't your hand, though. I can see that. You still possess both."

"Yes, see!" and Perdita held up the hand that did not hold the revolver.

"Whose dead hand did you send to Red Blade? And was the dagger the same one that—"

Dread Don paused abruptly, for the door below at the foot of the stair was heard to open.

"Never mind, Keno! 'I'll find the cap'n,'" said a harsh, rough voice.

A smile flitted over Dread Don's face.

"It is Mica Marle. Good! in excellent time is my right-bower!" he murmured, and then he waited for his lieutenant to burst into the room.

CHAPTER XII.

RUBY IN THE TOILS.

"IN heaven's name, where am I?"

The place where these startling words were spoken in agonizing accents seemed Erebus itself.

Not a ray of light entered to reveal the speaker, who, from the tones, was a young girl, and the words came back accompanied by a weird echo that was truly startling.

"Can it be that I am to be caged up in this pit of darkness?" continued the same voice. "Is it to be the sudden ending of my hunt for vengeance? Merciful Father! shall this wretch go on and on from one triumph in infamy to another? I curse you, Dread Don. I hurl upon your head the hatred of the child of the woman you struck years ago!"

The voice died away in the deep darkness, and for some time no sound was heard again.

If the gloom could have been lifted for a spell a young girl would have been seen standing in the middle of a cavern of considerable dimensions. Her figure was faultless in minutiae and outline. Fair golden hair fell about her shoulders in rich profusion, her eyes were deeply blue and beautiful, and her voice possessed a silvery sweetness that was out of place in the underground cavern.

This young creature was Ruby Ryan, the girl who came up from Custer City in the stage that carried Colonel Snowdrop and the box with the daggered hand.

We have seen her fall into the power of Dread Don, the very man she wanted to encounter; we have seen her marched from the Full Deck with his hand at her wrist, but since that time we have lost sight of "the seraph with the blue eyes."

She is found again in the cage to which the leader of the Cool Clan has consigned her.

If the young girl had possessed a light she might have explored the cavern, but she did not possess that luxury, and had to inhabit the intense darkness that seemed nearly palpable.

Was this to be the end of her hunt, a long imprisonment under ground, while Dread Don played on the game he had had in hand for years?

She went back in thought from the moment of her capture before Reptile Ralph's cabin to the present time. She recalled the march to the Full Deck Hotel, where in a little room on the second floor, she was confronted with the very man who had occupied one corner of the stage during the ride up from Custer. She had not spoken to him once during the trip, but she now knew that he was called Colonel Snowdrop, and that he was Dread Don's pard.

She had not failed to note that she had made an impression on the colonel, who was by no means a bad-looking man. He had repelled Dread Don in his harsh estimates of her character, and several times he had rebuked the desperado in his rough epithets.

Ruby was shrewd enough to observe that the colonel's motives were sinister ones, for he was hand in glove with Dread Don in more ways than one. He interfered to get the good-will of the girl, not that Don's language grated harshly on his (the colonel's) ears.

After the interview came the walk from the hotel to the cavern.

The girl felt the fingers of the desperado-sport at her wrist while she thought of it. He had looked down into her face with eyes aflame with triumph, and a dozen times he had repeated the words "blue-eyed viper" with a coarse laugh after the last one.

"I'll show you a Red Blade cage," he would say. "The doors that close upon you may never, never open. If you had known what is what, Ruby, my blue-eyed viper, you would never have come hyer with ther hand you hold."

She did not answer, but went in silence into the cabin to which he led her, and watched him loosen several planks that formed the floor. At last a dark opening like the mouth of a well was disclosed, and the young girl saw a rough-looking ladder, whose lower end was lost in gloom.

It was wide enough to let them descend together, and this they did, with the hand of the Cool Clan's captain still at Ruby's wrist.

The ground that met the pair after the descent was hard and firm, and the utmost darkness surrounded them.

Not once had the cheeks of the young girl blanched: her eyes had not lost their fearlessness.

They went down the dark corridor together, and at last, when in the cavern in which we have found the missing girl, she heard the gold-sport's voice again.

"This is the guest-chamber, Ruby," he said. "I am going back now, and woe to the pard, if you have one! You came hyer for vengeance. Colonel Snowdrop, the fool, may call you an angel with blue eyes, but I know better. I know your pedigree."

"You ought to, curses upon your head, Dread Don!" said the young girl, in cutting tones. "What I am, I owe to your hatred and your burning thirst for gold. If you had not plundered and killed for a secret which in the end shall do you no good, I would not be here. I would not have sought you out. Seal up this cavern; make me the eternal prisoner of this mine of riches, but the end shall be bloody; the last rod of the trail shall be a crimson one!"

She could not see the handsome desperado, but she could hear his laugh.

"A thousand hunters shall not beat us out of this stake!" he exclaimed. "We have played for it too long for that, girl. You don't know the man against whom you have pitted yourself. I am more than mere man. I am a devil!"

"My mother knew that."

The response was a brutal laugh.

"You're right! she did," said Dread Don. "She lost her game just as the daughter has lost hers. This is the big secret; here is the bonanza known to few men. This is the old mine which was discovered years ago to be utilized by Dread Don, ha, ha! Why, if Custer and Deadwood knew of it they wouldn't have a hundred inhabitants to-night. I could send a message to those towns that would depopulate them. But will I, girl? Not to-night, I think!" and the chief of the Cool Clan laughed again.

Then he stepped back and Ruby Ryan heard a singular and indescribable noise in the darkness.

"Dread Don?" she said.

There was no answer. She put forth her hands, but they touched nothing!

A strange feeling shot to the young creature's heart. Was she the sole occupant of the underground cavern?

All at once she started forward, and after a few steps her hands touched a wall. It was stone. She groped her way around the place, but could find no outlet. What had become of Dread Don? He could not have left without there being a place of egress.

It was mysterious to say the least; a cold shudder passed over Ruby Ryan's frame. She threw her hand to her head as if to keep off approaching delirium.

"My God! I need my strength now if ever!" she exclaimed.

The silence so oppressive made the minutes seem hours to the captive of the cavern. She knew that Dread Don was no longer a joint tenant with her. He had doubtless gone back to his companion the colonel, and the two were laughing perhaps over the caging of the blue-eyed huntress.

Ruby could not tell how far underground she was. The ladder leading down into the earth from the desperado's hut was not lengthy, but after it, she had descended a stairway cut from the hard ground. She did not count the steps and could not tell how far below the surface she might be.

At last, finding a rough rock like quartz on the hard floor of the cavern the girl captive tossed it aloft. It struck the ceiling with a faint sound, and came back to strike the ground with a dull thud.

She judged by the experiment that the ceiling was a lofty one.

"What if I awoke the echoes of this cavern again?" she suddenly exclaimed. "The villain who brought me hither if he be within hearing distance, will know that his acts cannot silence the person whose whole life is to hate him!"

The next moment Ruby lifted her voice in a series of loud cries that seemed to go beyond the cavern, but they brought no response excepting the weird echoes of their sounds.

At that very moment in one of the many cabins of Red Blade a man knelt on the floor with his ear against the ground which had been revealed by tearing loose one of the rough pine planks.

The interior of the cabin possessed no furniture as the tin lamp on a bracket revealed, and traces of a late fire were visible.

The face of the kneeling man was not visible, for his position had cast it in shadow; but this position told that it was a face with a resolute cast.

He was not large like Dread Don, but his figure was well knit and wiry, and his hands were as dark almost as the shadow he threw on the floor.

"I hear it! It is under me. A thousand to one, that it is a human voice!" he said in audible tones while he listened.

"There is a good deal of ground between me and that person. This mountain den stands over a cave of some kind. What did I hear Dread Don say about the biggest bonanza on

earth being under Red Blade? Ah! it is true! I am at the door of the secret at last."

He listened awhile longer and then got up. As he did so, the door of the cabin opened and he was suddenly confronted by a man at sight of whom he started forward and clutched an arm.

"Back just in time, Full Hand Frank," he said to this individual. "Get down there and put your ear to the ground."

The visitor looked at him with a smile.

"What have you discovered?" he asked.

"Get down there and see," was the answer, and he led the man called Full Hand Frank to the spot where he had knelt a moment before.

With eyes that sparkled with curiosity the visitor knelt and listened. He was watched by the other man with an interest as great as his own, but cast in different mold.

"I hear nothing," said Full Hand Frank, looking up with a disappointed countenance.

"I did," was the answer.

"When?"

"Just now," and the speaker dropped suddenly and put his ear to the ground again.

"I heard a voice. It was under me somehow," he said, without looking up, and then he fell to listening intently. "By Jupiter! I don't hear it now, though."

After awhile he got up and the lamp showed him to be Reptile Ralph.

"Don't you see the bonanza is under us?" he went on. "I have thought this before, but something always happened to throw me upon another trail."

"But where is the entrance?" asked Full Hand Frank, coolly.

"That is to be discovered."

"Can it be?"

"It shall! Dread Don took the girl off to-night. He has come back, but without her. I heard a human voice beneath us awhile ago. I'll bet my head that it was Ruby's."

"Let me listen again."

Full Hand Frank got down once more and applied his ear to the ground.

"I thought I heard something," he said, as he got up.

"You did," answered Reptile Ralph, in a low voice, as he clutched his arm. "It was the step of some one outside. I never saw you before to-night, Full Hand Frank. I don't know what brought you to Red Blade, and I don't care. I have just lost one pard, Noisy Nick, and I want another. We are both hated and hunted perhaps by the Clan. What do you say? Shall it be pards or each fellow for himself?"

"Pards!" was the quick response, and the hand of Full Hand Frank stole into Reptile Ralph's and settled there.

CHAPTER XIII.

NO WOMAN HER MATCH.

DREAD DON was more than anxious to see the door of his little room at the Full Deck Hotel open and Mica Marle make his appearance. He had heard the voice of his right bower on the stair and knew that he would soon enter the room.

Perdita heard it, too, and the sudden flashing of Dread Don's eyes told her who it was.

She stepped aside and threw a quick look toward the door about to open.

"Order your pard to remain outside," she said, speaking to Dread Don and her eye glanced over the revolver that covered the desperado. "Quick! there is no time to fool on an occasion like this."

The boss of Red Blade let his lips meet firmly and the woman got a tigerish look for her pains.

The next moment the door flew open and Mica Marle was on the threshold!

"Hyer I am, cap'n. I've tracked—"

He broke his own sentence and was staring at Perdita who was looking over the six-shooter.

"Jehosaphat! she has found you, I see!" he went on.

Dread Don did not speak, but a proud smile curled his lip.

Yes, the avenger had found him; there was no need of him answering his lieutenant.

"I guess a game like this can be played by three," continued Mica Marle and he had a revolver half drawn when the woman spoke.

"By three it shall be if you make it so," she said sternly to the right bower. "What do you say, Mica Marle?"

There was no reply, and the weapon half drawn was not taken from its pocket.

"Move to your captain's side. I will face you both and talk to you."

In the twinkling of an eye the woman's revolver was shifted toward Mica Marle and he was suddenly covered.

"You men have forced me to Red Blade to make the play I am making now," she went on. "The infamy of years ago must be atoned for. Go to Dread Don, sir—march!"

If glances could kill Perdita would have dropped dead before the bronze athlete she confronted.

The two desperadoes exchanged significant looks and Mica Marle moved sullenly to where Dread Don stood.

"Hyer we ar', woman," he growled. "Now go on with your game!"

"I will," was the quick answer. "Now, where is Julia's child?"

A strange silence followed the demand.

"I must know this first," continued Perdita.

"What if we don't know?" said Mica Marle.

"But you do! The hand that struck the mother, touched the girl."

"Prove it!"

The two words were full of defiance, and fell madly from Dread Don's lips.

"My proof is in Red Blade," was Perdita's answer. "You dare not let me prove your words, expose your secret, and show up your infamy in this camp."

"You would prove it by the man who accompanied you hither—by Montez," said Dread Don.

"By Montez, the man who would not lie to shield the infamous men who stand before me. Where is Julia's child?"

"Dead, mebbe," said Mica Marle, with a cool laugh that flushed Perdita's cheeks.

"Dare you lift your hands and swear to that?"

"We swear for no living creature," cried Dread Don. "Since you have turned this interview into a court of inquiry, you can go on and play it out."

"Then you refuse to tell me about Julia's little girl?"

"We impart no information beyond that just given by Mica."

"That the child is dead?"

"Yes."

A moment's silence followed the last answer.

"Men of Red Blade, I give you one minute in which to answer me," the woman said coolly.

"I shall count sixty under my breath. I don't care which one of you speaks. The question is to be answered with uplifted hand, which shall mean a silent oath. I begin now."

"Hold!" cried Mica Marle, throwing up his hand. "What if we refuse to recognize your right to question us?"

"I shall shoot, so help me Heaven!" was the reply. "I will walk from this hotel with two dead men behind me."

There was no response.

"Now go on," said Perdita, and the meeting of her lips told that she had begun to count.

The shoulders of the two desperadoes touched as they stood before her, and the little lamp that sat on the table in front of them made their dark faces a splendid target for Perdita's aim.

There was no visible movement of the woman's lips, yet the two men could see that she was counting.

The seconds flew by in silence, and on the wings of swiftness.

All at once, Dread Don's hand touched Mica Marle's below the top of the table, and their eyes met in the space of a flash.

"We would be fools to keep it from you any longer," said Mica Marle, as his right hand rose slowly and with solemnity above his head. "The girl is dead."

There was a slight start on Perdita's part. She leaned forward and looked the speaker squarely in the eye.

"Dead?" she repeated, and her voice seemed an echo.

"Dead!" said Mica Marle.

"When and where?"

"In Lost Gulch Camp, five years ago this summer."

"Julia's child, Edith?"

"Yes."

"How did she die?"

"By sudden sickness."

"This is on the uplifted hand?"

"See!"

Mica Marle glanced at the dark hand he held above his head.

"My pard speaks for me," said Dread Don at this juncture. "Your eyes will never again look upon Julia's child."

Perdita stepped back a little way.

"Nor upon the mother," she said. "I am the avowed avenger of both. Do you think that the secret you obtained at the cost of two lives will ever make you bonanza kings?"

The desperadoes did not speak.

"I have come to Red Blade for vengeance. I came to learn first the truth about Julia's child. I shall prove the statement just made. If it is true I will then strike; if a lie, the girl shall be found!"

Under Dread Don's drooping mustache was a cunning smile which the woman did not see. She stepped toward the door.

"Remember!" she said. "This is not the end of the game. The living cage has given up one of the birds. The other is where you men left her."

She was at the door which Mica Marle had left ajar, but her face was still turned toward the Red Blade pards.

"You sent the box, then?" said Dread Don, suddenly. "You drove the dagger through the dead hand and sent it to Red Blade as a challenge to fight?"

The eyes of Perdita suddenly assumed a strange glitter.

"That challenge came from the dead," she exclaimed. "The dagger hand is a message from the person who lost life and the gold secret

at one and the same time. It means war to the knife, and the knife to the hilt. Good-night, pards of perdition!"

The next second the beautiful speaker had stepped across the threshold, and was about to descend the stair.

"One word!" grated Dread Don, coming around to the table with clinched hands and blazing eyes. "You have made it war to the knife, and that it shall be! You have invaded the territory of the Cool Clan with a challenge that you send forth with a hiss. We accept, woman or devil—we don't care what you are! we will make this the hottest game you ever played. Go to the length of it as soon as you wish. Remember that the men who played for the bonanza secret six years ago have lost none of their cunning nor abated in the least their cool ferocity. Go! play alone or with Montez—we don't care how!"

The hand of Dread Don fell heavily upon the table, adding emphasis to his remarks, and the next moment he had straightened again and was glaring fiercely at the woman who from the top of the stair was giving him look for look and displaying a fearless mien strange at that time and place.

This confrontation lasted some seconds, when, without a word in reply to Dread Don's language, Perdita went down the steps.

All at once Mica Marle, pistol in hand, went toward the door. A tiger was in the mad eyes of Dread Don's right bower.

"Let me play the game out hyer, cap'n," he said, as Don's hand closed on his arm and held him back.

"No, let the siren go," was the reply, while the grip did not relax. "What was you saying when you came into the room a while ago? You had got as far as 'I have tracked—'; then you saw the woman and stopped."

"Oho! I was going to say that I had tracked Montez from Red Blade. He went toward Custer."

"He would not desert Perdita?" exclaimed Dread Don.

"I don't know; but I have made another discovery."

"Well?"

"There are two men in Reptile Ralph's shanty."

"Has Reptile sneaked back?" exclaimed Dread Don.

"I think he has; but the other man?"

"Can it be Montez?"

"I tracked him from Red Blade, I say," said Mica Marle. "I will not say that he did not 'back track' on me, but when I left Reptile Ralph's cabin, thar war two men in it."

"Let us investigate," replied Dread Don.

"But the woman—Dora?"

"Let her go. She will not attempt to sting again until she has investigated your Lost Gulch hoax. That was a brilliant move, Mica. She may find more than one grave in the gulch."

"If she is followed there will be more than one," grated the right-bower.

The little room in the Full Deck Hotel was soon afterward deserted by Dread Don and pard, and under the stars of early morning the two men moved secretly upon Reptile Ralph's cabin.

As for Perdita, the tigress, she had walked from the hotel to the street, from which she looked up at the lighted window that told of the pards' presence in the little room.

"If it is a lie I will find out," she said, to herself, while she eyed the window. "If Edith's grave is in Lost Gulch I will come back from it with a new oath of vengeance. After long search I have found the human devils of six years ago. They have reached the field where the battle is to be fought; they have seen the dagger carried in the dead hand that once belonged to the best friend I ever possessed. Time will come when the desperadoes of Red Blade shall feel it!"

"Why not now?"

The woman wheeled as if the voice of an enemy had hissed behind her, and she was joined by a man who caught her wrist as he stepped to her side.

"You?—Montez?" she exclaimed.

"It is nobody else!" was the quick reply. "I had a time with the wolves of Red Blade at Paradise Phil's, but I got away with a whole skin. The man who watched us at Custer, and then followed us here—Shady Sam—died in the saloon in the act of fighting a duel with me. I have heard a voice under the ground."

"Have you visited the bonanza?"

"No. I listened in a certain cabin. You remember the blue-eyed girl—Ruby Ryan—who came to Red Blade in the stage with Colonel Snowdrop, alias Gold Gideon of Frisco?"

"Yes."

"She has not been seen much since she got hyer. She fell into the clutches of Dread Don, who took her from camp. Now I hear the voice of some one under ground. Have they another tomb hyer, Perdita?"

"They have the bonanza. It is under Red Blade. You know that, Montez?"

"You have said so, and I believe," was the answer.

"Let the blue-eyed huntress be, if she is the bird in the cage," said Perdita coldly.

Montez bit his lips, as if the words of the woman were commands which he was forced to obey.

"What did you get from Dread Don?" he asked.

"A solemn statement about Edith!"

"Ha! Then you have found the girl's trail at last?"

"They say she was left at Lost Gulch Camp."

"Abandoned thar?"

"Yes, dead."

Montez gave the speaker a look that seemed to puzzle her.

"Who said this?" he suddenly asked. "Don?"

"No; his right-bower, Mica Marle."

"At the muzzle of your revolver?"

"Yes."

Montez laughed.

"What! don't you believe it?" asked Perdita.

"It may be, but the word of that gold glutton under such circumstances cannot be taken like gospel truth."

"I am going to try it," the woman said. "I am going to Lost Gulch Camp. It is a well-known spot. If there is a grave there, I will find it."

"What if thar is?"

"I will come back here."

"And if thar is none—"

"I will do the same! Here I am to make the fight for Julia and for vengeance."

Montez stepped back and looked into Perdita's face.

"By heavens! if you have a match in all the world, I'd like to see her!" he laughed.

"I think I have none!" said Perdita.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DISPLAY OF TEETH.

THE sun was beginning to disclose the shanties of Red Blade the following morning when a man well known to at least two persons in the diggings rode up to the Full Deck Hotel and dismounted.

The steed he had rode into camp was a little iron-gray, pretty well blown, and his fetlocks were red in several places, showing hard riding without rest.

The man was past forty, well built and good looking. On this occasion he showed some excitement, and was quite nervous.

He rushed into the hotel without ceremony, leaving his jaded steed to take care of himself, and a moment later he nearly ran against a sleepy-looking individual who happened to enter the bar-room at that moment.

"Hello!" ejaculated the new-comer, clutching the sleeve of the other and shaking him into certain wakefulness. "By my sweetheart! it is Keno Keifer. Say, my boy, where is Dread Don?"

"Colonel Snowdrop for a thousand!" was the response.

"That's me, Keno; couldn't be anybody else in this skin. But where's the cap'n?"

"At his shanty, I suspect. Been riding, eh, colonel?"

"I should say I had. Bad road that twixt Red Blade and Custer. Horse fell down once."

"No part of your anatomy injured I hope, colonel."

"No."

"Good! I was just going to get an eye-opener; got little sleep last night; had to get up a giant's breakfast before daylight. Come along, colonel, and sample some of the Full Deck's pisen."

Colonel Snowdrop was nothing loth, but he was in a great hurry of some kind. He told Keno Keifer as much, which accelerated his movements.

As the colonel was pouring out his morning dram, the bartender leaned over the counter and caught his eye.

"I guess they didn't get onto that, colonel," and he glanced at the broken window, which was to have taken suspicion from Snowdrop as regards Noisy Nick's death.

"I hope not," said Snowdrop, setting down his glass. "Deuced good idea, that window, eh? Reptile Ralph was inclined to raise a little disturbance, but Don's revolver quieted him. My dear Keno, you did your part well. Accept the thanks of Erastus Snowdrop till better paid. I'll find Dread Don now; business of importance. At his shanty, eh? Will see you later. Rode up here thinking that Don might be with you at the bar, you know."

Colonel Snowdrop walked out and straight to the cabin known as Dread Don's abode. It was not unlike the many other shanties of Red Blade and no larger than its neighbors.

His horse followed at his heels, and was at the door when he lifted his hand to knock.

"He won't be looking for me," muttered Snowdrop, referring to the man he expected to see beyond the threshold of the cabin, and then he gave three heavy raps and waited for a response.

He did not have to wait long, for the door was pulled open by some one inside, and Colonel Snowdrop stepped forward to confront Dread Don of the Cool Clan.

"Back again, I see," said the captain of the

Clan, surveying the colonel from head to foot as he entered. "You don't let any grass grow under your feet, colonel."

"I should say not, and no living man knows that better than Dread Don. I went down on a snail's back, but I came up on the lightning's wing. You got my message?"

"Yes."

"And you fixed the tigress and her pard?"

"Can't say that I did."

Dread Don smiled coolly to see the colonel start forward and show a little sudden paleness about the gills.

"Heavens! we can't afford to let her play a full hand here," he exclaimed.

"Who said we intend to?"

"Nobody, Dread Don, but—"

"Well, colonel?"

"That woman is Dora, calls herself Perdita, though."

"Granted."

"She came up here to find you. She called me Gold Gideon in Custer. It made my flesh creep when I found that she knew me."

"Didn't it ever creep before?"

"Yes," and the colonel shuddered visibly. "Where is she?"

"Gone to Lost Gulch, I guess."

"To Lost Gulch?" echoed Snowdrop.

"I think so. She wants to find the girl's grave."

"Edith's?"

"Yes."

"Is it there? I thought—"

Colonel Snowdrop checked himself and looked into Dread Don's face. The captain of the Cool Clan waited for him to proceed, but he did not.

"Did you make any discoveries in Custer?" asked Dread Don at length. "I understand that you went down on important business."

"I did."

"It was about the blue-eyed seraph."

"Yes. I didn't find out much, but I got a grip on an item or two about her."

Dread Don smiled under his mustache, and his eyes told the colonel to proceed.

"My estimate of that girl was the correct one," continued Snowdrop. "She did not fetch the daggered hand to Red Blade, although she came up in the same stage that brought it. So did I. She came to Custer from Denver, and is by no means a dangerous girl. In Custer she conducted herself in a very becoming manner, and I conclude, Dread Don, that you have misjudged her."

"Thanks, my dear colonel," laughed Dread Don with a bow that was so full of sarcasm that Snowdrop's eye flashed. "When I reflect that some one cannot see much resemblance between mother and daughter, I think that I should not blame you for want of perception. Let me say that the girl is whom I said she was. I know! I don't care what other people say."

"She is not Ruby Ryan, then?"

"No more than she is Queen Victoria."

Colonel Snowdrop bit his lip again.

"If I could see her once more I might be convinced—"

"I am convinced!" interrupted the Red Blader. "The blue-eyed viper is not to be seen just now."

"Isn't she in Red Blade?"

"No. I think you had better drop the blue-eyed enemy and turn your attention to the dark-eyed one."

"Which is Dora?"

Dread Don's eyes said "yes."

"You let her get away," said the colonel accusingly.

"I let her go to Lost Gulch—yes," was the reply.

"And her pard, Montez, too?"

"I expect so."

"These are queer tactics," snapped Snowdrop. "I don't know as I would play them, but you have the handling of the cards, you and the Clan."

"I generally play my own games and I play them through, too," was the answer.

"Does that mean that I am not wanted here?" grated the colonel, and as he spoke he stepped forward until scarcely three feet lay between him and Dread Don. "You made me promise that I would join you at the expiration of five years. I have done so. You are camped over the bonanza whose secret we have worked for a long time through thick and thin. I am here to take my share when the time for division comes. Am I to be shelved now—at this stage of the game?"

The eyes that confronted Dread Don snapped like animated coals. The colonel lost much of his beauty when enraged, and he seemed ready to fly at the Red Blader's throat with the rage of a panther.

As for Dread Don, he threw back his chest and looked the foaming man squarely in the face. He even smiled under his mustache, and there was a twinkle in the depths of his eyes. It was evident that the colonel had not disturbed him.

"You go off like powder just as you used to," he said calmly, and in rebuking tones.

"You make me," was the retort. "You seem anxious to drive me from the bonanza before my hand has touched a nugget."

"Keep off of ground that is mine, then."

Colonel Snowdrop stepped back, and gasped:

"Which—is—your ground?"

"That trod by Ruby, the viper."

"So! You still take an interest in the girl who came here with me. To you she is the daughter of the woman you hated years ago; to me she is harmless when pitted against the Cool Clan of Red Blade."

"Oh, yes; a tigress, but without claws. I see," sneered Dread Don; and then he stepped toward the colonel, as he exclaimed: "Shasta Leon, I forbid any living creature to try to discover the fate of that young girl. She is my enemy, and I shall become the foe of the man who attempts to find or befriend her. She came hyer for my blood; she has found Red Blade with but one object in view—the taking of my life. In her veins is the blood of the woman I hated while she lived. She—Ruby, as she calls herself—will never shed the blood of Dread Don! You understand?"

Colonel Snowdrop did not speak, but watched the face that had a merciless look, yet was so handsome, with dark hair framing it.

"As for me driving you from the bonanza, that lies in your hands."

"That may be."

"It does; no doubt about that. You can go or stay. If you stay, you must keep away from the claim I own. The blue-eyed viper captivated you—that is not difficult to see. If you live to be one hundred years old, which is not likely, you will never pass from the influence of soft eyes. The bonanza is within our grasp. If you stay, you must meet the enemies as they come. I have met one and have attended to her. The other will come back from Lost Gulch Camp with a revolver cocked in her hand. Then there is a man somewhat called Full Hand Frank, and Reptile Ralph who is anxious to pay his respects to you, colonel."

"Is that loafer from Jordan Valley about yet?" ejaculated Snowdrop.

"Yes, and he is pretty certain that Noisy Nick wasn't shot by some one on the outside of the Full Deck. The shattered pane was a good scheme, but Reptile Ralph got onto it after a season of thought. Now, colonel, which shall it be: a season of cool work hyer in defense of the bonanza, or a residence elsewhere till the Clan has played all the hands out?"

"I've made up my mind to stay," said the colonel. "I have never yet turned my back on an enemy and I never will. See here, Don. I tear the blue-eyed viper from my thoughts and I am ready to play any hand you set up. I am for the bonanza, first, last and all the time! I want to be Gold Gideon again, and I can't without the ore. Swear me into the Clan—"

"I can't do that till there is a vancancy. We are seven."

"Then I must fight on the outside, but under your orders. Take your old pard's hand, Don. Here we are for the bonanza and all our foes!"

Dread Don's smile broadened as he took the hand that was thrust forward, and looking into the face of Colonel Snowdrop he said to himself:

"This sudden zeal is all fudge, old fellow. You have already begun a little game of your own. Watch me block it."

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSE QUARTERS.

FOR a day Red Blade had peace. While the sun was still low several men took the corpse of Shady Sam the Custer miner and laid it away under a little hill where there were half a dozen mounds, each one of which could tell a story as tragic as the one connected with the sudden closing of Sam's life.

Colonel Snowdrop had established himself permanently at the Full Deck Hotel, and Dread Don had introduced him to the members of the Cool Clan who were told that the colonel was to share equally with the others in the new bonanza. He received a sullen welcome which seemed to pass unnoticed, for at times Snowdrop was a good dissembler, and could play a game as deep as the next man.

At his request he was given a room at the Full Deck removed from the top of the stairs.

"By Jupiter! I don't like that one," he said. "A fellow could slip up the steps and burst right in upon a man without much warning. I want time to prepare for attack. That rascally little galoot called Reptile Ralph is still at large, and as he suspects that I dropped Noisy Nick he may take a notion to interview me."

In the floor of the narrow corridor leading to the colonel's new room were several loose boards which gave out a peculiar noise when stepped on and this suited Snowdrop.

It was not probable that any person could walk down the corridor without stepping on these boards, and several experiments assured the colonel that he had made an excellent removal.

"If you think, Dread Don, that I have given up the blue-eyed seraph you will find yourself mistaken," he said to himself more than once while the day was slipping away. "I don't care whose child she is; she is a daisy and no mistake, and I would as soon have her as my share in the bonanza. I think I'll play a hand

for the girl. Ruby Ryan she calls herself, and I'll wager my stamps that she has a right to the name despite your assertions to the contrary, Dread Don. You did show your teeth when I confronted you in your cabin, but I think I finally hoodwinked you. I said I was for the bonanza, and not for the girl. I said it well, too. By Jericho! it takes a man with my experience to say things well!"

Colonel Snowdrop had tried to put in the day to some advantage. He had circulated freely among the Clan, and by a number of adroit questions had attempted to find Ruby's whereabouts. But if the men knew they did not throw any light on it, and Snowdrop was forced to retire discomfited.

"I'll try a new scheme," he said. "Maybe Dread Don took her into the old mine. If I can find the entrance I'll explore it and see what is there."

Then he tried to find the entrance to the cavern under the gold camp, but with no more success than before.

He bit his lips and cursed roundly.

"Never mind! I'll get there!" he exclaimed. "Before long I'll be in a position to play my little game openly, and the exhibition of teeth will do you no good, Dread Don."

It was nine o'clock when the colonel left Paradise Phil's place and retired to the Full Deck where he ascended to his new quarters on the second floor, and tried the squeaky boards till the trial brought forth smiles of satisfaction. I am not going to say that the colonel had taken too much of Phil's liquor, but he was not as steady as he might have been, and he came near going to bed in most of his clothes.

Half an hour passed away, and then the drowsy man was startled by a sound that seemed to take his breath.

One of the boards in the hall had been stepped on and while he listened bolt upright in bed with his fingers around the butt of a revolver, the silence became as ominous as the noise just heard.

"Maybe the rascal got scared by the noise he made and went back," muttered the colonel. "He must know that death awaits him if he opens my door. I am prepared to send a bullet crashing through his brain, and bake me for a jack rabbit! if I hesitate to do it."

The last word had barely escaped the colonel's lips when squeak! went another board, and Erastus Snowdrop landed on the floor and proceeded to cover the door with his weapon.

"There's another board to squeak if he doesn't miss it, and then comes the door," he murmured.

It was not altogether dark in the room. There was a full moon in the sky, and a flood of white light came in at the window and showed the stalwart colonel half clad and ready for the man supposed to be in the corridor only a few feet away.

Seconds were minutes then, minutes hours, as in the intense silence the breathless colonel waited for his man.

The door was not locked, so that the prowler had but to lift the latch and spring in to his death.

"Why doesn't the fool come on?" ejaculated the colonel growing impatient. "Jehu! what if it should be Dread Don or one of the Clan? I can't shoot till I discover who the fellow is. I'm not in a fix to do any promiscuous shooting in Red Blade just now."

All at once the latch moved with a click that was startling in the silence. The colonel's revolver dropped a little lower and his lips met firmly; the crisis had come.

The next second the door opened.

"Halt!" said Snowdrop sternly over the leveled six-shooter.

The visitor obeyed, and the colonel saw a figure at the door and a pair of eyes that glittered like diamonds.

"Friend or foe?" asked Snowdrop.

"Foe!"

As the word sounded the man darted forward, dodged under the revolver with the quickness of a cat, and had the colonel around the body before he could cover him and touch a trigger!

It was the work of half a second.

"Foe! bet yer life, Shasta Leon," continued the new-comer as the colonel fell back upon the bed with the attacking party on top.

"You have to watch better than you do to save your neck. Aha! don't you know me, Shasta alias Snowdrop?"

"Reptile Ralph!"

"Bet yer huckleberry! I'm ther pard of Noisy Nick, Shasta. We war all tergether in Jordan Valley once, but I couldn't place yer till I got down and thought deep over Noisy's car-kiss. I've located yer now, colonel, thar's no mistake. Don't try ter patch up a lie an' say that ye didn't kill Noisy because he had found yer out ner that ye war once ther highest juniper in Jordan Valley. It won't go down this rooster's throat."

All this time there was a hand at the colonel's windpipe that seemed to be shutting off his life. He had dropped the revolver, and it had slid to the floor without noise.

"You will go with me, colonel! I came hyer for you," said Reptile Ralph.

"With you?" gasped Snowdrop as the grip at his throat was relaxed a little.

"Thet's what I remarked," was the reply. "Come! You've played yer game ter ther cost of a life, an' it is my game now."

Reptile Ralph drew off and let his enemy get up. In the moonlight he did not seem half as large as the colonel, but he was a giant in strength, a panther in cunning and agility.

"We will go out the way you come hyer," continued Reptile Ralph. "I'll show you my new pard in a minute. He's playin' his part of ther game on ther first floor. Forward, colonel! I'll honor you with yer title, though I'll bet my life you don't deserve a letter of it. A still tongue and no monkeyin' keeps a whole head. March!"

Watched by the glittering eyes of Reptile Ralph that looked over the barrel of a revolver, Snowdrop was forced to march from the room and down the corridor toward the stair.

He swore secret vengeance against the little man who had stolen this march on him, and a dozen times he tried to gather courage enough to wheel and dash suddenly at his foe. But it was the quick finger at the trigger that always deterred him.

He went down the steps still at the mercy of Reptile Ralph's revolver, and when near the bottom, he saw another man looking up at him.

"All right," said this man to Ralph. "I've got the coast clear for the play."

Colonel Snowdrop seemed to lose his last hope when he heard this new voice. He had hoped to see a demonstration in his favor in the bar-room below, but the man waiting for him at the foot of the stair told him that there would be nothing of this kind.

The disappointed man was marched into the bar-room, which he found empty.

Where was Keno Keifer? What had become of the usual night frequenters of the place?

Tramp, tramp, through the room to the front door, and thence into the street! Then down it to where the cabins grew scarce, and then past them all.

"Are they going to take me to Custer?" mentally ejaculated the colonel, as he was marched on and on with the two men, silent but watchful at his elbows.

Reptile Ralph's pard overtopped him in stature, and was his physical superior in every respect. But he had not the glittering eyes of Noisy Nick's friend, and the colonel concluded that he was not so dangerous.

The two men took Snowdrop two miles down the Custer road before they halted. Then they reached a spot where the moonlight silvered the ground, and showed the trees and the walls of the pass.

"This place suits me," said Reptile Ralph to his companion. "Does it suit you, Shasta?"

"You are playing this game, you say," he hissed, giving Ralph a mad glance. "You have stolen the meanest march on me I ever heard of. Go on. Play your cold deck out."

A laugh rung from Reptile Ralph's throat.

"The game played ag'in' Noisy, beats for genuine meanness any ever played in Red Blade or elsewhere," he said. "When I burned ther body in ther shanty, I swore ter pay back ther man who shot him. Without any ceremony, colonel, I am goin' ter do thet now."

"Without giving a fellow a show?" grated Snowdrop.

"Nary a show!" was the heartless retort. "You know the unwritten code of the Hills; Man is his own avenger when he kin strike. when he cannot, his next friend does it for him. I am Noisy Nick's next friend. This is Full Hand Frank, my new pard."

Colonel Snowdrop looked at the man indicated by a wave of the speaker's hand.

Their eyes met.

"We have never met before," said Snowdrop.

"An' when yer part you'll never meet ag'in!" put in Reptile Ralph, who had taken from under his coat a coil of thin dark rope that caught the colonel's eyes.

"Is it to be *that*?" he asked.

"Bet yer life, colonel," and Ralph coolly uncoiled the cord, showing an already formed noose that slipped easily.

"Look here," suddenly said Snowdrop, throwing up one hand. "Let me tell the truth and leave the case with you men."

Reptile Ralph ceased suddenly to manipulate the rope and looked up with a smile.

"Ther truth from Shasta Leon of Jordan Valley?" he laughed. "Go on, colonel!"

"I shot Noisy Nick," continued Snowdrop, meeting the eyes of the two men calmly. "I did not do it because he claimed to see in me an old acquaintance. What cared I for that? I shot him because I had to save the life of Erastus Snowdrop. It was the quickest eye and the best trigger, and the result must show that I had both."

He paused and saw Reptile Ralph take a quick step forward.

"Self-defense, eh?" ejaculated the little man.

"Self-defense."

"Don't yer make this plea a little late in ther day?" was the response.

"I would have said the same, if put on trial."

"Then why didn't yer come out with it when ther pards of Red Blade confronted yer while ther body of Noisy still lay whar he tumbled? Why did Keno Kife, who saw ther whole affair, say thet ther bullet came in at ther window. Colonel, this is thinly disguised truth. It won't wash in this court."

Colonel Snowdrop's teeth met madly, and his eyes gave Reptile Ralph a terrible look.

"You don't take my word, then?" he said.

"Hardly," and the little man turned coolly to the rope again.

"What say you?" asked the colonel, looking at Full Hand Frank.

"Reptile Ralph is judge and jury," was the answer.

"All right!" grated Snowdrop. "As my solemn statement about Noisy Nick's death is pronounced a lie, one just as solemn concerning the location of the biggest bonanza under ground would be counted the same."

He saw the effect of these words on the two men.

Reptile Ralph almost dropped the death-cord; the next moment he stood face to face with the colonel.

"What do you know about it?" he exclaimed.

"More, perhaps, than I will ever throw at the feet of two men who want my blood," was the cautious answer.

"What if I'd give you a chance?" said the little man.

"I should reject it."

"An' be a fool?"

"Yes, if that would make me one."

Reptile Ralph stepped back several paces and suddenly threw the coil over his head. The colonel watched the circling in the moonlight.

"Hands down!" said Full Hand Frank at his side.

The following moment the lasso left Reptile Ralph's clutch, and whirling forward, dropped over the colonel's head. It caused him to start as it settled on his shoulders, and was jerked taut by a dextrous movement on the little man's part.

Then Reptile Ralph sprung to one of the walls and made the other end of the rope fast about a sharp rock that jutted out.

Where he stopped was a cleft in the wall and beyond its threshold was darkness untouched by the moonlight.

"About face! March!—into the cleft yonder!" commanded Reptile Ralph, giving the colonel a mad look. "We call this place the Devil's Leap! Forward!"

The lasso had tightened about the neck of the doomed man, and the revolver of Reptile Ralph covered him!

CHAPTER XVI.

WHERE A DAGGER BROKE.

"HADES and horns! whar's the colonel?"

It was an hour after Colonel Snowdrop's departure from the Full Deck Hotel in the hands of Reptile Ralph and Full Hand Frank, that the exclamation just written fell from the lips of Dread Don, and he leaned over the bar and glared at the man who stood in a half-stupor in front of his liquid wares.

He had just tramped down the steps from Snowdrop's room and his eyes told that something had taken place.

"Hyar! wake up, Keno! Hang me for a Celestial! if you don't look like you've been asleep. You heard me? Whar's Snowdrop?"

"I've been—been drugged," said Keno Keifer, pressing his hand to his temple.

Dread Don laughed.

"With your own infamous whisky then," he cried. "Drugged! I'd like to know who'd drug you?"

"Two men came hyer awhile ago, Reptile Ralph an' another—a new pard, I suppose. Reptile sneaked away, but the other remained. Deuced good fellow, I thought at the time, but he must have been Satan in satin. I recollect that he got me to reading the letters on my bottles at long range, and always just before we took something. He must have manipulated a game, for I swear by the spoons of the temple, Don, that I knew nothing when he went away, nor till you came an' shook me up behind the counter."

There was honesty in Keno Keifer's eyes, and Dread Don had to admit that he was telling the truth.

"But the colonel?" he said.

"Isn't he up-stairs?" asked the bartender, meekly.

"Would I be hyer shooting these questions at you if he war?" was the answer. "The bed's been tumbled; thar ar' marks on the floor as if boot-heels slid over it in a scuffle. Two men, you say?"

"Two."

"Reptile Ralph stole a march on the colonel." Keno Keifer started forward and caught Dread Don's arm across the counter.

"For Heaven's sake rescue him," he cried.

"He owes me five thousand dollars."

"What for?" demanded Dread Don.

"That is, he promised me that much if I'd not give him away to Red Blade."

"In the Noisy Nick matter?"

"Yes."

"That's a desperate slow note, Keno," laughed the captain of the Clan. "Why, that old fool hasn't got half enough to pay an hour's interest on the amount. Five thousand, eh? By Jove! that's Red Blade's best joke."

The bartender colored and his eyes flashed.

"Then, by Jehosaphat! I'll give him away!" he cried.

"If Reptile Ralph has got his work in there 'll be no use for that."

"But you will save him, won't you? You will rescue the colonel, so that I can get even with him for lying?"

"Well, hardly!" laughed Dread Don again. "I'm not anxious to hear of the old fellow quitting life at Reptile Ralph's hands; but I don't know that I'll dislocate my spine looking after him."

"I thought you were pards."

"We ar' to a certain extent, but I'm under no sworn obligations to risk my neck for Colonel Snowdrop."

"He'll have a time saving his own. That's my opinion since it's likely that he's tumbled into the clutches of Reptile Ralph and the bound who drugged me, and whom I'll know whether I meet him in this world or the next. You hear me, Don?"

Keno Keifer brought his fist down with emphasis upon the counter and supplemented his remarks by taking a drink.

When he turned to resume the conversation just then uppermost in his mind the leader of the Cool Clan was just vanishing through the door and the next second had disappeared altogether.

"Hello! here's my man!" exclaimed a voice at that moment, and Dread Don found himself confronted by a youth who did not look more than eighteen.

"Who ar' you, boy?"

"Jim Stephens, Jumping Jim, ever since I beat Rattlesnake Ranch. You are Dread Don."

"That's me."

"I have a letter for you."

The boy dived one hand beneath his loose jacket and found a square packet which was tied with a cord and sealed in three places with red wax.

"For me?" said Dread Don in tones of surprise as he took the packet.

"For Dread Don of Red Blade."

"Who sent it?"

"It ought to tell that on the inside."

"That's a fact, Jumping Jim," smiled the boss of the camp. "You're ter take an answer back, I suppose. Come down to the shanty."

Dread Don walked away followed and watched closely by the boy from Rattlesnake. If he had looked over his shoulder he could have seen that the messenger's eyes had an unusual glitter.

The seal of the packet was not disturbed during the walk to the cabin. Dread Don crossed the threshold and took the little lamp from its usual place on the bracket and placed it on the table. Then he dropped upon a three-legged stool and turned the message over and over in his hand.

"Got up like a state document, eh?" he said, glancing up at Jim whose eyes had lost none of their peculiar glitter.

"Looks that way," replied the boy.

Dread Don went to work to break the cord and seals, and at last began to open the pocket itself.

His eyes became riveted upon the paper from the first, and all at once his voice was heard first in a hiss and then in harsh tones.

"Hades an' horns! what means all this?" he cried. "I'll make this a lie. Listen to this, Jim. No! I want to know just who gave it to you."

"The writer, for all I know," said the boy. "Isn't it from a friend, captain?"

"Do you think a friend would write this?" and Dread Don, proceeded to read:

"The lie that sent Dora to Lost Gulch Camp will send Dread Don bloody to his grave. The daggered hand will lie across his face in the light of his lamp or under the moon. The game played by the chief of the Cool Clan is nearly out!"

"Thar!" said Dread Don, letting his clinched hand fall heavily upon the paper which he threw upon the table. "Do you think that came from a friend, Jumping Jim?"

The youthful messenger came forward.

"I'd like to see that writing!" he said.

"Thar's the lay-out."

Jumping Jim leaned forward, but he did not fix his eyes upon the paper.

All at once one of his hands dropped upon Dread Don's shoulder at the collar and the next moment he spoke again but his voice was totally changed.

"The message does not lie!" he said. "The dagger of vengeance is here now, Dread Don! There is no grave in Lost Gulch. Aha! don't you know me?"

The desperado of Red Blade gave a sudden start; his eyes seemed about to fly from his head.

"My God! Dora!" he cried.

"Perdita, I am called sometimes," was the answer. "See! this is the blade you used six years ago, Dread Don, when the price of the

gold secret was blood. I return it now with interest."

The chief of the Cool Clan attempted to leave his stool, but the hand of the unmasked avenger seemed to bear him down.

"Take this for the past!" she exclaimed, and before Dread Don could arrest the knife it came down!

The next moment a wild cry pealed from Dora's throat, and as she staggered back Dread Don leaped up with a bitter laugh.

The woman was standing in the center of the room holding in her hand a dagger handle, but no blade!

"Coward!" she hissed, as the desperado sport swooped down upon her and seized her wrist. "Under your shirt you wear a protection against the blade of vengeance."

"Against assassins!" laughed Dread Don, piercing her with his eyes, that seemed to emit arrows of fire. "So you came back in the dress of a boy? Jumping Jim, from Rattlesnake Ranch, eh? By Jupiter, that's a title that scoops any I've heard in a long while. Wrote the letter yourself, to catch my eye and unnerve me? Whose victory is it now, Dora?"

She drew back the length of his arm, and looked him squarely in the face. Her eyes told that she was capable of playing boy no longer; their glare destroyed her role.

"I ought to send both hands to your throat, and choke you to death," Dread Don went on. "You didn't find Edith in the gulch."

"No."

"Of course not! That was one of Mica's shrewd plays."

"A lie."

"Bet your life, my poison viper. So I am not to play the gold game out? We will do it tonight—now! Not here, though, not alone. I want to show the clan the seraph with the dagger. I want you to see the assembled tigers of Red Blade."

Perdita made no reply beyond the defiant sentences that leaped from her eyes.

Dread Don's hand seemed to Lurn its way into her wrist. He started toward the cabin-door, dragging her after him, strode out into the moonlight, and down the street toward Paradise Phil's, which was the rendezvous of the pards of the mountain camp.

As usual, the door of the den was wide open. Perdita saw the lights beyond, and the figures of men. She looked up into Dread Don's face, but her lips did not move.

"It's the daisiest set of men-tigers that ever got together," he said, catching her eye. "They're all hyer, too!"

The next moment he was at the door, and the next inside.

Somebody greeted him with a whoop, and then half a dozen men started forward, with eyes fixed on the fair prisoner.

"Who hev yer thar, cap'n?" asked several.

"A she-viper in male skin!" was the reply.

"This creature is playing against all Red Blade, but especially against the Clan. She broke a dagger-blade on my bosom awhile ago. Take her in, boys," and Dread Don pushed Perdita forward. "She's got a pard, Montez, somewhat, but we'll tend to him later. Shoot me for a catamount if she wouldn't swing well at the end of a lasso. She is Red Blade's greatest enemy."

The bronze tongs of the gold camp crowded forward and glared like so many tigers at the woman who was compelled to face them all with no weapon of defense at her command.

She had never met the whole Clan before, but in front of them all she drew her figure to its true height and gave them look for look.

"Say, viper, whar's Montez?" suddenly cried Dread Don.

"Find him!" laughed Perdita.

"We'll do that," was the quick retort. "He'll come sneaking back to see what's become of you, and Red Blade will fasten on him."

"Before that happens," flashed the avenger, "the fingers of death will feel more than one throat in this den. Find Montez? Yes, you will find him, but not when you look for him. Where is the rope I am to stretch, Dread Don? Show me the noose the coward spreads."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE DREAD REPORT.

THERE was something startling in the sudden return of Perdita from her trip to Lost Gulch camp whither Mica Marle's falsehood had sent her to find the grave of Edith, Julia's child.

Dread Don was looking for her, but not in the shape in which she had appeared. The role she had assumed, that of Jumping Jim from Rattlesnake Ranch, was the last one expected of her. She had attacked like the cyclone, and had it not been for the impenetrable armor beneath Dread Don's coat the dagger would have found the heart at which it had been aimed.

"I must deal swiftly with this tigress," said the desperado of Red Blade as he looked into the face and the flashing eyes before him. "She has the cunning of the fox and the nerve of a murderess. Nothing can stand between me and her vengeance if I let her off. I must have no scruples now; the bonanza is at stake."

Perdita still stood before the pards of Red Blade with the air of a conqueror. Her head was thrown proudly back and her hands were clinched. She was giving the Cool Clan look for look.

Suddenly one of Dread Don's hands executed an upward movement. It was a signal that all understood, for the Clan sprung forward and in an instant Perdita was in its clutches.

"Nobody but the six!" said the voice of Mica Marle who was the first to touch the huntress and his glance swept the little crowd that looked on. "Men of Red Blade, this woman has broken the laws of the Clan, and the hand that is put forward to assist her falls beside a dead man!"

Perdita offered no resistance. What was the use, in the power of six men like Mica Marle?

She was hurried swiftly to the door and thence from the saloon, leaving the crowd behind to wonder over her fate.

Outside in the moonlight Mica Marle stepped to Dread Don's side.

"What shall it be, cap'n?" asked the lieutenant. "We can't afford ter give the tigress rope. The bonanza is in danger."

"That is true, Mica," was the answer. "You know the false entrance?"

"Yes."

"Let that be her entrance into eternity."

"Alive?"

"No. I want no risks taken," said Dread Don quickly. "We must fight wolves with fire."

"Will you go along?"

The boss of Red Blade shook his head.

"I don't want to hear her voice again," he said. "Tell her for the last thing, Mica, that the bonanza is the biggest one in existence. That'll soothe her final moments, maybe, ha, ha! Tell her, too, that Julia's child will never avenge anybody, and don't forget to assure her that Montez will cash his chips on death's counter the moment he reappears in the game. You will do this?"

"Bet yer life, cap'n."

"Go!"

Dread Don turned his back on Mica Marle and walked away. The lieutenant of the Clan went back to the men and gave the order:

"To the false hole cabin!"

The Clan started off with Perdita in its midst, and Dread Don with his chin resting on his shoulder and a flash of triumph in his eyes saw them vanish down the street.

"Farewell, my stinging viper," he exclaimed. "This time I have a cage for you from which you will never emerge to play a desperate hand. The day of the steel-handled dagger has already ended. After a few more plays, which may be necessary, we will open the most gigantic bonanza that ever existed. It will be gall for Dora to hear this from Mica Marle. Ta, ta, my huntress. We never meet again."

Dread Don walked back to his cabin and found the blade of a dagger on the floor. He picked it up and laughed while he looked at it in the light of his lamp.

It was the proof of Perdita's failure to kill, and the sudden ending of her hopes.

"This will be one of the trophies of the biggest game of my life," laughed the desperado sport. "I'll just put it away where it can be seen, and tell its story of the tigress's failure."

He wrapped his handkerchief about the blade and had turned to drive it into one of the logs when a strange noise startled him and the door was burst open.

Dread Don turned to see a man pitch headlong across the table and then fall with it to the floor!

"Hades and horns! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Red Blader, leaping toward the man, revolver in hand. "Colonel Snowdrop! by all that's holy!"

A groan was the response, and the person on the floor rolled into the lamplight.

"Great Caesar! I'm Erastus Snowdrop," he continued. "May I never wear a seraph's wings if I'm certain that I'm on *terra firma*. I've been hanged!"

"Hanged?" echoed Dread Don, and his hands swooped down upon the colonel as though they were the talons of an eagle.

"Sit up hyer and get your wind," he went on, jerking Snowdrop up and shoving him toward one of the stools. "You don't look like a seraph just now."

"And I don't feel like one, either," gasped the colonel. "I've read accounts of men who lived after being hanged, but I never took any stock in the yarns; but hyer I am—a living example of the truth that all hanged men don't die, that is, if I am really *compos mentis*."

"Keep to straight American, colonel," said Dread Don. "No hog-wash lingo in this camp."

"All right. Yes, sir, I've had a rope about my neck. I was dragged from my room in the Full Deck and marched off toward Custer between two droppers."

"Who carried them?"

"Full Hand Frank and Reptile Ralph."

"I could have guessed one of them, but I would not have thought of the other. Go on."

"About two miles from Red Blade, at a place in the trail called Devil's Leap, I was halted and noosed without a show of tenderness."

"I should say not, seeing that Reptile Ralph had the handling of the cord," smiled Don.

"Not a show of tenderness or mercy, I say," Colonel Snowdrop went on. "It was enough to make a cherubim weep, which is not classing myself with that people. Well, when Reptile Ralph had made fast the other end of the noose to a sharp rock that juts out near the cleft in the wall, he commanded me to march forward. I was facing the cleft, understand, and had the pleasure of looking into the little rascal's revolver while he spoke. I ground my teeth and went forward. Great heavens! I couldn't do otherwise under the circumstances, and I knew that I would soon step into space which was as dark as Egypt and without foundation."

"But you did not," remarked Dread Don, with a smile.

"Thank fortune, no," said the colonel; "but it wasn't my fault that I did not. I went forward, covered by Reptile Ralph's pistol, and all at once, just as I had been expecting, down I went! Jehu! my blood froze as I dropped, but all at once my feet struck a rock, and my legs seemed to be jammed up into my body. It wasn't the intention of the two rascals for me to stop there; they did not know that nature, in one of her late convulsions, had forced a rock from the chasm wall and blocked up the horrible place just where my rope ended. It was salvation for Shasta Leon, Don. For a moment I lost my senses; but as soon as I could, I reached up, caught the rope over my head and stretched it. By and by I heard voices overhead, and Reptile Ralph jerked the cord till he was satisfied that I was dangling in mid-air at the end of it. I fairly held my breath till they went away. May I lose my Latin, if I was a minute getting to the top of the chasm with the aid of that rope! I came hyer on the run, and half the time I seemed to be running in a dream; but it was Snowdrop, all the same—a banded man, with the marks of the death-cord under his chin. What has happened since they took me away? The bonanza is safe yet, of course, and the blue-eyed—I mean the tigress from Custer, hasn't come back from Lost Gulch Camp."

"She is back," said Dread Don.

"In Red Blade?"

"Yes."

"Then we've got to play a full hand against her, captain. I haven't recovered from my awful experience at a lasso's end, but you'll find me ready to assist you in any game that looks to the safety of the bonanza. I have to look out for Reptile Ralph and his pard, too, for I just want to toss their brains skyward at the muzzle of a revolver. So Perdita is back. Does the Clan know it?"

"I should say it did," smiled Dread Don. "The tigress is now in its hands, with no chance of escape."

"Good!" cried the colonel. "And her pard, Montez—"

"We'll set a trap for him," was the interruption.

"I begin to feel like another man. By Jupiter! Don, I am almost willing to be hanged for news like this. Do you know, when Shady Sam told me on the stage-road that she was playing a hand against us, the contents of my spine seemed to turn to ice-water? Jehu! I thought, that creature and a pard in the game? Good-by bonanza!"

"She was in the cabin awhile ago, and left this," said Dread Don, displaying the blade of the broken dagger.

Colonel Snowdrop leaned forward, eyed the steel for a moment, and then looked up with a laugh.

"She hadn't the strength to drive it through steel, eh, captain?" he cried. "Her intention, no doubt, was good enough, but her arm was weak. I'd like to see her, shoot me if I wouldn't! If she was here, you got the best of her. Where will I find the huntress?"

Colonel Snowdrop got up and glanced toward the door.

"Wait till Mica Marle reports," said Dread Don. "He is playing the fatal cards at my command. The Clan is with him."

"Oh!" ejaculated the colonel. "I see you have turned her over to the Clan?"

"She is in their hands. Mica is to report to me hyer."

The colonel went back to the stool, and the two men had the table between them.

"What is it worth?" suddenly asked the colonel.

"The bonanza?"

"Yes."

"I can form no calculation," was the answer. "The late owners didn't develop it a great deal; but its richness surprises me, and I have seen some of the biggest 'finds' in history."

Colonel Snowdrop leaned back and inserted his thumbs in the arm-holes of his waistcoat.

"Monkey about an idea anyhow, captain," he said. "Give me your opinion of the worth of the find."

"What if I would say several millions?" said Dread Don in a laughing way.

"No!" cried the colonel. "Why, my share would make me Gold Gideon again! Three millions, eh? We must have run afoul of an Ophir."

"Ophir is nowhar to our bonanza!" exclaimed Dread Don enthusiastically. "The time will come when Deadwood and Custer must know of it, but first we want our private enemies out of the way. We can't work the mine and fight such people as Dora and her pard."

"That is true, but the tigress is fixed, you say?"

"Wait till Mica Marle reports."

Colonel Snowdrop grew impatient the longer he sat there, and a minute later he was asking whether Mica could not be hurried up.

"Give him time. He is playing against a woman, you know," answered Dread Don.

Five minutes more passed and the captain of the Cool Clan began to share the colonel's impatience. He cast anxious glances toward the door.

"I told him to come hyer direct from the cabin," he said at last. "Mica knows that I am anxious to hear how Dora took the playing of the last hand."

"There! I heard something outside," ejaculated the colonel. "It sounded like the fall of a heavy body."

Dread Don went to the door and threw it open. The next minute his stalwart figure was leaning half-way out, and Colonel Snowdrop was watching it almost breathless.

Suddenly the chief of the Clan uttered a strange exclamation and darted forward. The colonel was at the door in an instant.

He saw the body of a large man stretched on the ground in the moonlight, and Dread Don was crouched over it.

"In heaven's name what has happened?" cried Snowdrop as he landed at Don's side.

The desperado sport looked up to speak a name.

"Mica Marle!" he said pointing at the body.

"Not dead?" gasped the colonel.

"Dead!" said Dread Don.

CHAPTER XVIII.

POSTED AS OUTLAWS.

SURE enough on his face and headed toward Dread Don's cabin lay the lieutenant of the Cool Clan dead but warm.

Life had not left him three minutes.

"In Satan's name, who did this?" grated the desperado of Red Blade as he left the dead man and leaped up. "The brazen gates of Tartarus shall open for his withered soul!"

Colonel Snowdrop stared at the two men, the dead one and the living.

"I'll help you, captain," he said at last.

"You, you?" roared Dread Don. "I'd like to know what you can do in a case of this kind. Touch the man who killed Mica Marle and I'll have you skinned alive."

"Which would be a very unpleasant experience for the skinned, loop me for a Greaser if it wouldn't," said the colonel, drawing back, for Dread Don had taken a mad step forward and stood within three feet of him with glaring eyeballs. "Very well, then. If my services ain't wanted I'll emigrate."

"Go or stay; suit yourself!" cried the captain of the Clan and then he dropped beside the dead man.

He turned him over and opened his jacket.

"I see. A knife did it," he muttered.

"A knife, eh?" exclaimed the Colonel stooping.

"See hyer—the knife itself."

"Jehosaphat!" gasped Snowdrop drawing back suddenly. "I should say so."

Dread Don was holding in his hand a roughly made bowie whose blade was about six inches in length and was fastened securely in a hilt of iron. The steel bore fresh blood-stains, for it had just been taken from the breast of Mica Marle.

"Do you know what I'm goin to do?" hissed the sport as he rose and thrust the knife forward on the palm of his right hand.

"Couldn't guess for a nickel," was the response.

"I'm going to sink this blade into the heart of its owner!" Dread Don went on.

"I don't object to that. He war our pard, and—"

"He was mine!" interrupted the Red Blader. "I must remind you, colonel, that you are not a member of the Clan."

"But there's a vacancy now."

Dread Don made no reply, but turned about and coolly walked off, leaving Snowdrop within three feet of the man with the moonlight on his dead face.

"You don't always know how to take that man," murmured the colonel, gazing after Dread Don. "I've seen him in his tantrums before, and never put in to my advantage. I have been invited to go or stay. That's almighty plain, strikes me. Well, I'll stay. There is work for me here, and a thousand glances from that man's eyes, a thousand threats snail not move me. I play my game, Dread Don; you yours!"

Dread Don walked to a certain cabin near the northern end of Red Blade. The door was shut but not locked. He pushed it open and went in.

Stooping in the darkness he fumbled about till he found one of the planks that formed the rough floor, and this he took up.

If the desperado had been provided with a lighted match, he would have seen a large opening under his position, but he knew it was there without the light.

"They have been hyer, for the under boards have been removed, so I know that she did not give Mica Marle the blade," he said, in audible tones. "The boys went back to Paradise Phil's and Mica was on his way to report when they found him."

A minute later the disturbed board had been replaced and Dread Don was hurrying toward the famous saloon where he expected to thrill the assembled toughs with intelligence of Mica Marle's murder.

He found the usual assemblage at the retreat, and half a dozen men caught sight of him as he reached the threshold.

"It war well done, cap'n," called out several voices as he entered. "Thar war diamond grit in that tigress in male attire. She went to her end—"

The sudden lifting of Dread Don's right hand put a stop to the voices, and he stood in the midst of his men with a countenance which told that something terrible had happened.

"Mica Marle is dead," he said, using the strongest and most startling language he could think of.

The words drove the whole gang back as if a cocked revolver had been thrust into their faces.

"Dead?—Mica Marle?" they ejaculated.

"Dead and by this!"

The Cool Clan look at the bowie thrust forward by Dread Don, and then at the man who was their leader.

"He left you whar?" asked the desperado sport.

"In front ov ther shanty when we war through."

"He was on his way to report. I thought so," said Dread Don. "Come with me and see the dead."

The whole crowd which still showed evidences of their amazement made a hasty break for the door. They found their old leader at their head when they reached the street, and the next moment he was leading them back to Mica Marle.

"Hyer's the old pard," he said halting beside the corpse, and facing the silent five. "The bowie of an assassin has made the first vacancy in the ranks of the Cool Clan."

"What's that pinned to his shoulder, Cap'n?" asked some one.

Dread Don stooped and then pounced upon a piece of paper that fluttered from the dead man's shoulder.

"It was not hyar when I left him," he said. "The wielder of the bowie has had the cheek to come back."

Instinctively the desperadoes of Red Blade crowded forward and looked at the paper now in Dread Don's hand. A match had already been lighted, and Don was trying to read the sentences traced on the paper.

"Read 'er out!"

"Pshaw! it is from the fool of the camp," was the response and then Dread Don read aloud as follows.

"DREAD DON AND PARDS:—"

"I have concluded to leave Red Blade, perhaps forever. This decision is a hasty one, but final. I have made a discovery that forces me to this action. My share of the bonanza when it has been divided I give to the Clan. I may be a fool in some things, and I think I am, but I can see that it is not to my interest to remain longer in Red Blade. This man is still dead, and is likely to remain so. I hope the bonanza will be a rattler. I may become Gold Gideon again before I join the seraphs, but it will not be by the Red Blade divide. Gentlemen, farewell!"

COL. ERASTUS SNOWDROP.

The reading of the letter was followed by a laugh which sounded strangely over the corpse in the moonshine.

"One fool less," said Dread Don, tearing the paper to finders and scattering the pieces above his head. "He'll be forgotten before he's ten miles from the camp."

"Didn't he say that a sartain diskivery is what took him away?"

"What if he did?" snapped the bows of Red Blade. "That war said to add importance to his letter. Colonel Snowdrop, alias Shasta Leon, discover anything? He never got that far along in life. His inquisitiveness war fast making him the Jonah of this camp, and his going away is to his advantage."

The pards then examined the dead man, and Dread Don ran his hand under Mica Marle's dark shirt-front.

A slight exclamation escaped his lips.

"It is gone!"

"What, cap'n?"

"I don't know, for I never knew what it contained. For some years Mica has carried next to his skin a little buckskin wallet that contained something accounted very precious. It is gone now."

The men exchanged sudden glances, and it was evident that they were of one mind. Was it possible that Colonel Snowdrop had found the buckskin pocket, and that it was this that had taken him so suddenly from Red Blade?

Dread Don seemed to read their thoughts.

"Colonel Snowdrop had no idea that Mica had the buckskin sack," he said, looking into the eyes of his pards. "The person who killed him got it."

This seemed to be the most plausible solution, yet it did not satisfy all. There was a doubt that the user of the iron-handled bowie had secured the little thing called valuable by the dead rough.

Thirty minutes later, in one of the cabins of Red Blade, lay the figure of a man who moved not. A little lamp burned dimly on a heavy bracket above the white face, and the only sound within the shanty was made by a cricket, whose rest had been disturbed by the bronzed men whose hands had placed the man on the floor.

Shady Sam was soon to have a partner in the little graveyard on the hill, and the fingers of the lieutenant of the Cool Clan were never to touch the gold of the big bonanza.

There had fallen over Red Blade a silence akin to that which hovered about Mica Marle's cabin.

Men moved about Paradise Phil's place without their usual boisterousness. The card-tables had no occupants, and aside from the few drinks taken in silence, business was exceedingly "dull."

Against the wall near the door, and directly in the glare of the largest lamp, was a paper, and upon it, in rude capitals, had been written four names, the last with an interrogation mark after it, thus:

"MONTEZ!
REPTILE RALPH!
FULL HAND FRANK!
COL. SNOWDROP (?)

These four names were in dark-red ink, which was very suggestive, and so large were the characters, that they could be read without difficulty from any part of the room.

It was evident that these men were marked. The association of their names told this, and the occupants of the saloon glanced often at them as they discussed the late events in Red Blade's history.

In the midst of it all, there suddenly stalked into the place a man whose appearance was the signal for ejaculations of surprise.

He was not much over five feet, but he was well built, and passably good looking for a mountain tough. His eyes had the glitter of the rattlesnake's when excited, but his compressed lips showed uncommon coolness.

Once inside the door, he turned toward the placarded names, and suddenly whipped out a bowie of good length of blade.

The next moment he had taken a step forward, and then the knife came flashing down and was buried deep in the placard.

"You know what that mean's!" he said to the thunderstruck crowd, and vanished.

It was Reptile Ralph!

CHAPTER XIX.

TOLD BY THE DEAD.

"I'm no giant, but oh, my!" ejaculated the little man who had bounded from Paradise Phil's place as if fired from a cannon. "I'm going to make my weight felt in this camp. They've posted four of us for outlaws. I don't keer when they get two, but the others will make things hum before they go down."

Reptile Ralph did not wait for the crowd that rushed to the door with drawn revolvers when it had recovered from the astonishment into which his cool act had thrown it.

He glanced over his shoulders and grinned as he saw the men staring at the bowie in the board, and walked off. When the toughs of Red Blade reached the moonlight, he was gone.

"I got one item of news that 'stonished me," he said to a man whom he joined in the first shadow, and who had waited for him. "Somebody has killed Mica Marle. He lies in his cabin dead."

"With the pocket next to his heart?" asked the listener, eagerly.

"I don't know about that."

"I must know."

"When?"

"Now."

The last speaker was Full Hand Frank, the little man's new pard. His eyes had filled suddenly with eagerness and he seemed ready to hurry off.

"Is that pocket worth risking your life for?" asked Reptile Ralph, touching his sleeve.

"It is. There is a mystery about Mica Marle's life which that buckskin pocket will solve. Although the lieutenant of the Cool Clan was not the biggest man in Red Blade he was, in some respects, the most important."

"But don't you think he was killed for the key to the mystery?"

"An examination of the corpse will show that. Which is his shanty?"

"The fifth one from hyer on the right," said Reptile Ralph, pointing down Red Blade's main street. "You will go straight to it and come back hyer?"

"Yes."

"All right."

Full Hand Frank left the little giant and crept through the shadows thrown by the cabins of the bonanza camp. He was on a mission that kept his eyes bright with excitement and as nobody seemed to watch him he soon reached the shanty where Mica Marle lay in the dim light of his little lamp.

The young sport waited a few moments in the shadows of the cabin and then slipped inside. All was silent there; he saw the stiffened figure on the floor and the lamp above it.

All at once he stooped and ran his hand under the dark shirt through which the bowie had been driven.

"Gone! Reptile Ralph was right. The hand that drove the knife home took the pocket."

He did not relinquish the search however until he had made a thorough examination.

"Gone it is," he said, getting up. "I am too late. If I want the key to Mica Marle's life mystery I must find the man who struck him down. And I find him—"

Full Hand Frank stopped abruptly and laid his hand on his revolver as he started toward the door.

A moment later a tall man came in and barely missed the searcher of the dead who had stepped into the shadows.

"Mebbe the thing got loose and slipped down," this person said. "Why didn't I think before that the bowie might have severed the cord?"

Full Hand Frank saw the man get down over the corpse and run his hands beneath the clothing. But first he took the lamp from its bracket and placed it on a stool to give him better light.

This action enabled Frank to see his face and he recognized the boss of Red Blade—Dread Don.

For five minutes the captain of the Cool Clan searched the corpse with an eagerness just displayed by Full Hand Frank. A pair of keen eyes watched him all the time and a smile came gradually to the young sport's lips.

"All my work is for nothing," said Dread Don. "Mica will go to the bill without his amulet, as he called it. The man who drove the dagger knew it was there when he struck."

"I think so, too."

Dread Don wheeled with a light exclamation of amazement and the next second Full Hand Frank stepped forward and confronted him.

The two men thus strangely met eyed one another a little while, the hand of one at his belt, that of the other holding a heavy revolver already drawn.

"Full Hand Frank, the man who wanted to fight Noisy Nick at Paradise Phil's," said Dread Don, the first to speak.

"I am he."

"And here?"

"Yes. You did not find the amulet, Dread Don."

"No."

"I was a little ahead of you."

"What! did you get it?"

Full Hand Frank smiled.

"My search resulted the same as yours has," he said. "I share your opinion—the person who slew Mica Marle got the amulet."

"I think so. You knew of its existence, then?"

"I did."

"You came to Red Blade for it."

"Not exactly."

"But you came hyer for it to-night?"

"That is true."

For several moments Dread Don looked his antagonist in the eye and then exclaimed:

"Sit down hyer! This stool is mine, that one yours."

The captain of the Cool Clan had taken his hand from his belt and the fierce light had faded from his eyes. As he finished he dropped upon one of the two high three-legged stools that the cabin contained, and did not speak again until Full Hand Frank had followed his example.

"I want you to tell me what you know about that man and his amulet," he said, glancing at the corpse of Mica Marle. "He and I have been pards a number of years, but I never really knew him. A better man, a truer pard a human never had, and this hand is for the man that drove the bowie to his heart."

Dread Don put out his hand and let it rest on the little table where the lamp was.

"Now, go on," he continued to Full Hand Frank. "You can see by my eyes I suspect that I am eager to hear."

The young sport hesitated and glanced from Dread Don to the dead.

"Perhaps it should be a mystery no longer and yet I don't know that I am authorized to disclose it," he said.

"Why not?"

"I will!" suddenly said the young sport, and Dread Don leaned forward to catch his next words:

"That man yonder is Reginald Ralfe."

Dread Don was on his feet as if a torpedo had exploded under his stool.

"Do you tell me this?" he cried facing Full Hand Frank.

"You asked for the truth."

"And I wanted it, too. But in heaven's name, I did not expect a revelation of this sort."

"You knew Reginald Ralfe, then?" said Full Hand Frank.

There was no answer. The captain of the Cool Clan was standing like a statue in the middle of the room, and his eyes were riveted upon the dead lying at his feet.

"I won't believe it!" he suddenly exclaimed. "That man called Mica Marle by me, Reginald Ralfe? It is a lie!"

The biting accusation was not resented; on the contrary Full Hand Frank's eyes twinkled, and he bit his lips.

"I'll give him all the string he wants," he said to himself. "I know what I know."

"Will you repeat that?" said Dread Don at last. "Will you say again that Reginald Ralfe is lying there dead?"

"Yes; it is true."

"Go on."

The chief of the Clan had gone back to his stool and the hand that rested on the table quivered now and then.

"I have never seen the bare skin on that man's back," the young sport went on. "I will swear to this, Dread Don; but if there is a scar midway between the shoulders he is Reginald Ralfe as surely as you are Dread Don."

"It is there! I have seen it a hundred times!" cried the desperado sport.

"And questioned him about it?"

"Yes, but never knew who gave it to him."

"It was a woman's love-mark and a bowie made it," Full Hand Frank went on.

"He never told me that."

"One of his secrets, perhaps," smiled the young sport. "He got that mark before he became your pard, Dread Don. He turned and throttled the woman, when he was supposed to be in the agonies of death. When he found her dead he would have given his life to bring her back. It was Reginald Ralfe's romance. After that, as I say, he became Mica Marle."

"But the amulet?"

"I came here for it, and so did you."

"But you know something about its contents?"

"No. If I knew I would not have risked my life here. Now, what do you know about Reginald Ralfe?"

"I know that a certain mining district was once posted with placards, offering a reward for him, dead or alive. It was ten years ago."

"One year after he killed his jealous sweetheart," said Full Hand Frank. "I found him in the mountains, badly torn by a grizzly, and when he got well he was my pard. I had no thought that he was Reginald Ralfe. If I had, knowing about the great crime he was said to have committed on Christmas night, at Lizard Lay-out, I would have added death to his bar wounds."

"What was that crime?"

"The murder of the camp's waif, a little child, and the burning of the cabin afterward. Yes, if I had discovered at any time during our pardship, that he was Reginald Ralfe, the Clan would have lost a member."

"By death?"

"Or expulsion! But do you think, Full Hand Frank, that the amulet contained his confession?"

"It held more than that."

"What?"

"Let us get it and see," was the reply.

"It shall be found!" cried Dread Don. "My opinion is that the person who killed him got the amulet. The slain sweetheart may have had a brother, or the father of the waif of Lizard Lay-out may have hunted him down."

"Lola had a brother, it was said; but did you ever hear, Dread Don, that the man who always talked about bonanzas had one bigger than you ever saw?"

"No. Do you mean Mica Marle?"

The young sport nodded.

"It was said that Reginald Ralfe deposited at one time in a bank at Frisco three hundred thousand dollars; that it was to be paid to the man who should bring to the counter an order sewed up in a buckskin bag of peculiar shape, and that the bank officials should ask no questions."

Dread Don uttered a wild cry.

"The buckskin bag he wore on his breast was triangular in shape," he said.

"That partly confirms the story of the deposit."

"This is the strangest romance I ever met with," the desperado sport went on. "Do you know the bank?"

"Colt and Bowie's Private Bank."

"Then, by the eternal heavens! the cheque shall never be cashed!" cried Dread Don, his dark eyes flashing again, and the next moment he stood erect, looking down on the young sport.

"How will you prevent it?" asked Frank, quietly.

"Leave that to me!" was the quick response.

"If that order reaches Frisco it shall prove worthless to the man who killed for it. Is this story of the big deposit well known?"

"No."

"All right. The man who holds the buckskin bag shall never use his new bonanza. You came to Red Blade for it."

"I did not."

"I recollect that you made your first appear-

ance hyer the night Noisy Nick was shot. You did not come in the stage that brought Colonel Snowdrop and the girl?"

"No."

"But you came because I was hyer."

Full Hand Frank was on his feet by the time the last sentence had left Dread Don's lips.

"I came because some one else came," he said.

"I have given you a great deal of information, Dread Don. Dare you give me a little?"

"Of what sort?"

"Dare you tell me where Ruby Ryan is?"

The captain of the Cool Clan started back and glared savagely at the questioner.

"So you want the blue-eyed viper?" he said, with a laugh. "I might have guessed that you war her friend. What do I know about the girl?"

"You know where she is," said the young sport, calmly.

"If you think so, find her," was the reply. "I don't throw my best cards into my enemy's hand. Thanks for your revelation, Full Hand Frank. You ask too much when you want to know where the colonel's seraph is."

A moment later the closing of the door told the young sport that he was alone with the dead. He did not follow Dread Don, therefore he did not see him touch a certain man on the arm and whisper at his ear:

"You must go to Frisco, Wildcat Lige; you must start to-night. I will give you the proper instructions."

CHAPTER XX.

THE MAN IN THE TRAP.

It was getting on toward midnight when a man well mounted went out from Red Blade and took the road leading toward Custer City. He was a robust, resolute-looking fellow, of thirty-five, with keen eyes and long hair that shook around his broad shoulders as the horse carried him rapidly down the trail.

Wildcat Lige with Dread Don's last instructions still ringing in his ears, was already on his way to Frisco.

It was his duty to watch the counter of a certain bank if he could not find a certain person in another way. The order in the triangular buckskin bag was to be found and nabbed. Dread Don had told his messenger and agent that it must never be cashed by the man who had taken it from the dead.

It need not be said here that Full Hand Frank's revelations had startled the captain of the Cool Clan.

While he knew that the amulet, as Mica Marle called the little sack, contained something of great value to its owner; he never dreamed that its contents, with the sack itself, was good at the counter of a certain bank for near half a million dollars.

"Wildcat Lige will reach Frisco first; he will find the man who found Mica Marle's heart with the bowie, and the big check will never be cashed by the killer. While he is gone we will play a hand of our own hyer. Dora is an inmate of a cage from which no bird escapes; Ruby, the blue-eyed viper holds the gold fort, and Montez will be nabbed the moment he shows up. As for Reptile Ralph and Full Hand Frank, they will harm nobody. Red Blade is on top again, and I have my fingers on a new bonanza. Jehu! who dreamed that my right-bower was Reginald Ralfe!"

The night as it wore on found the singular messenger—the tough with long hair and keen eyes—still on the road which would eventually land him in Frisco.

If Dread Don had picked the Cool Clan over he could not have selected for the duty a better man than Wildcat Lige and with this we will dismiss him for the present, promising the reader that we will show him at work in the gold-coast city.

Dread Don on his way back from his dismissal of the messenger looked in upon the corpse in the dimly lighted cabin. If he expected to find Full Hand Frank there he was disappointed, for the young sport had vanished.

"Captain?" said a voice behind him, and Dread Don wheeled upon one of his own men.

"What is up now, Chinguapin?" asked the captain. "Any more surprises for to-night?"

"Not unless Wildcat's goin' away is one."

Dread Don laughed.

"I sent him, Chinguapin," he said. "Wildcat is not to stop this side of Frisco."

The member of the Cool Clan started.

"Jehu!" he exclaimed. "Must be almighty important business to take—"

Dread Don's hand darted at his man's arm and clutched it.

"Look at that man half in the moonlight yonder!" he whispered. "He is too tall for Reptile Ralph."

"It is the New Mexican, captain," was the answer, also in a whisper.

"Montez? The fool has come back to the net!"

Dread Don and Chinguapin stood in the half-open door of Mica Marle's cabin; and about twenty-five yards away, half in the shadow of another cabin, stood the person whom they had discovered.

A second look told the boss of Red Blade that Perdita's partner, the man who had outwitted him at Paradise Phil's, had come back, if, indeed, he had left the camp after the encounter.

Montez was now one of Red Blade's outlaws; his name headed the list through which we have seen Reptile Ralph coolly drive his bowie.

And this man was still in camp! His audacity almost excited Dread Don's admiration.

For several minutes the two pards watched the New Mexican with fingers at the triggers of heavy six-shooters. He stood by the shanty, as if waiting for some one.

Was he waiting for Perdita, and did he not know that she had fallen into the hands of the Cool Clan?

"That is the man who got the amulet. I'll stake my head on it," whispered the desperado-sport at Chinguapin's ear. "If Wildcat Lige war in camp now, he could stay."

If Chinguapin intended to reply he was cut short, for at that moment the man called Montez stepped forward, and was instantly covered by the two revolvers.

"Watch him—follow!" murmured Dread Don, and the next moment the two sports were at the New Mexican's heels.

He did not lead them a long chase, for he went direct to the cabin to which the Cool Clan headed by Mica Marle had conducted Perdita. They saw him halt at the door, and throw a look over his shoulder.

"Heavens! he knows!" ejaculated Dread Don.

"If he didn't, why would he single out that cabin?" was Chinguapin's reply. "He is hunting the tigress pard—the woman who broke her dagger over your heart, captain."

While the two men looked they saw Montez open the door and walk in.

"We have him in a trap of his own selection," said Dread Don. "He will soon discover that Dora the tigress has played her last hand, and also that he has played his."

The two pards moved cautiously forward until they reached a spot within a few feet of the false hole cabin. The door was shut and showed them nothing; but by the window alongside they caught the momentary glimmer of a match.

"He won't be five minutes finding it out," said the boss of Red Blade.

"Do we drop him when he comes out?"

"No, we cover him and take him to the boys at Phil's. The next time thar will be no escape, and no daggered hand in a circle of light. Thar! the match is out; he has thrown it down. Now, ready, Chinguapin."

The revolvers of the pards were held out side by side; they were eager to see Montez at the door.

Several minutes passed away but he did not appear at the threshold.

Chinguapin and his master exchanged puzzled looks. Was Montez conducting his search for Perdita in the dark?

At last the hands of the two desperadoes quavered; they could not hold the revolvers out any longer.

By and by they glided forward and halted within three feet of the shanty door. Their revolvers went up again in the moonlight. Dread Don leaned forward, a stern gleam in his eye.

"We have you in the trap you made for yourself, Montez," he said to the man supposed to be inside. "We are the Cool Clan of Red Blade, and you are completely in our power. Come out and face us like a man?"

There was no reply.

"Mebbe the fool went straight through," suggested Chinguapin with a look at Dread Don.

"Investigate."

Chinguapin glided away but soon came back around the corner of the cabin.

"It is all solid thar, Don," he reported. "The man from the south is in thar."

Dread Don gave the cabin another look and ground his teeth.

"The boys! Bring them all hyer. I'll stand guard while ye'r gone. If the door opens I'll get the dead drop on the smart Aleck from New Mexico."

Away went Chinguapin and disappeared in a moment while the captain of the Clan stepped a little to one side and fixed his gaze on the door.

"The man in thar is playin' a peculiar game, but it will do him no good," he said to himself. "He forgets that he has pitted against him the men of Red Blade. Ah! hyer ar' the boys."

Four men, stalwart fellows all, stood before him, and Chinguapin reported all ready for duty.

"The man in thar is Montez, the first man on the marked list," said Dread Don, addressing his pards. "He holds to ther darkness with a hand which he expects to play against us all. Now, I'll summon him out once more. Ready, all!"

The next moment his voice was heard in stern tones of command:

"For the last time, Montez, come out."

The eyes of the Red Blade toughs flashed along the barrels of their leveled weapons; each one stood like a statue in the moonlight.

The answer to Dread Don's demand was silence as before.

"Forward!" whispered the desperado down the cool line. "What is one man to five? Charge!"

The banded roughs sprung forward with alacrity, dashed open the door and rushed into the cabin.

The door closed behind the hindmost man, and a bunch of matches snapped like the report of a revolver.

"Gone!" said some one.

"Gone!" grated Dread Don.

The interior of the false hole cabin was empty, and the puzzled men of the mountain Clan looked into their captain's eyes.

"It beats me," said Dread Don. "That man came here; he never left by the door. I did not lose sight of it for a moment. It cannot be—"

"The pit, captain," interrupted some one.

"Do you think he would attempt to search it for Perdita? I will not call Montez a fool like that."

But the leader of the Black Hills pards stooped over the heavy boards that covered the yawning pit under the cabin and began to part them. The men assisted, and in a few minutes the chasm was disclosed.

Dread Don lit a match and touched it to a ball of paper, which was soon in a blaze.

"We'll send it down the trap," he said to the men, whose bronzed and anxious faces were seen about the edge of the pit.

The next moment he threw the blazing ball downward, and the five toughs watched its descent with much curiosity. Down it went striking here and there as if passing through a network of timbers, until it struck the floor of the pit.

All at once something flashed up beside the blazing ball, and the report of a revolver filled the place.

At the same moment a wild cry burst from a man's throat and one of the roughs leaped up and staggered back to strike the boys a few feet away and to fall alongside with the shriek dying on his lips!

"Jerusalem!" cried the Clan.

"The devil is in the pit and he has got Chinguapin!"

Yes, the man in the trap whoever he was "got" Chinguapin, for that worthy lay on his face half doubled up against the wall, with a dark spot between his eyes!

The pards of Red Blade looked once into the crimsoned face of the tough and drew back with eyes that seemed to be on fire.

The next moment they were at the brink of the trap, and one and all were emptying their revolvers into it!

They did not cease until the steel chambers were exhausted, and even then they drew off with reluctance.

It was not possible that anybody at the bottom of the pit could live after such a terrible fire. It was swift vengeance for the death of Chinguapin!

If the Clan could have gone to the bottom of the hole with a match immediately after the firing they would have seen a narrow passage leading from it, and in this path a man who clutched a revolver as if awaiting the charge of some foe.

Well built he was with a darkish skin and long hair, and while he stood erect in the chamber he looked back and threw a laugh over his shoulder.

"The fools have found the bonanza, but they don't know all its secrets, ha, ha, ha!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE CLAN'S NEW RECRUIT.

Two men were buried the next day instead of one.

Mica Marle and Chinguapin.

The Cool Clan was growing smaller, and Dread Don was looking through Red Blade for two men to fill the vacancy.

Just as night was coming once more the Deadwood stage pulled up before the door of the Full Deck Hotel and a single passenger dismounted and showed his well-bearded face and fine physique to the little group of toughs that always welcomed the vehicle at that particular spot.

"Thar's ther cap'n's man," said one of the lookers-on. "He doesn't like ter take a Red Blader, for he calls them shaky. He'd like ther looks ov that man, though; he's business from hat ter boots."

There was something attractive in the newcomer. He was rather well-dressed for the region, and his big brown hat had the wide brim thrown back so that the Red Bladers could see the whole face with its cool black eyes above the bearded cheeks.

He spoke good naturedly to the crowd as he passed into the hotel with a rather heavy valise in his hand, and Keno Keifer, always anxious to receive new guests, learned that Mr. James Jessup, alias Jasper James, had just arrived from Deadwood.

Dread Don was made aware of this arrival, while the stage passenger was discussing the quality of Keno's liquor with the ever thirsty

gold-campers, and he lost no time in reaching the Full Deck.

The moment he entered the bar-room the eyes of the two men met, and the next moment had introduced themselves.

Jasper James did not belong to Deadwood, although he had spent the last six months there. He belonged nowhere, was at home wherever his hat was off, and to prove this assertion he doffed his big brown sombrero and laid it on the counter at his elbow. He hinted rather broadly that he wanted excitement, and Dread Don's eyes glistened when Jasper James remarked that he guessed more than one camp had "posted" him.

"This is one of my new men," said the boss of Red Blade to himself. "Thar is grit, coolness, and judgment in Jasper James. We'll make him a member of the Clan if he will stay."

In less than an hour after the traveler's arrival he was closeted with Dread Don, who concluded that he need go no further for a man to take Mica Marle's place.

It was acceptance at first sight, and when the matter was broached to Jasper his eyes glistened suddenly, and he said he was in for anything that promised excitement and a share in a bonanza.

Long before midnight he with another man was taken into the Cool Clan, with a little show of ceremony, and the organization once more had its complement full.

"Come with me and I will show you something worth fighting for," said Dread Don, touching Jasper James's sleeve, and the two men entered the desperado's cabin.

"We ar' standin' over the biggest bonanza that exists," said Dread Don with an air of triumph. "The dreams of the Deadwooders and the Custerites cannot equal it. It has never been half worked; indeed, but little ore has ever been taken out, and its original discoverers are dead—dead!"

"Then we won't have to fight for it," said Jasper James.

"Not now. In another part of it are the last enemies we had. They went down into the trap last night, and their skeletons will be the ghosts of the mine for ages to come. One was a woman—"

"A woman?" echoed the new recruit.

"I ought to have said a tigress," smiled Dread Don. "She came hyer for blood and shed some, but it was her own. We make no distinctions in Red Blade; we crush the she viper as quickly as we shoot the male wolf. This woman had a pard—a man called Montez. He gave Mica Marle the bowie last night, and we riddled him from the top of the false hole after he had killed Chinguapin. To-night yet he is to be visited by the Clan, for it is supposed that he has on his person an article of great value, an amulet worn for years by Mica."

Jasper James listened to Dread Don while he removed several boards of the floor and revealed a hole and a flight of steps.

"This is the only true entrance to the bonanza," the captain of the Clan went on.

"How came you to find it?"

Dread Don laughed.

"It was the work of years, Jasper," he said. "We got an inkling of the secret long before there was a Red Blade. There were no Deadwooders and Custer Cities either. It took the skill of more than one man to ferret the thing out. In the first place, the lay-out was discovered by a small party of men who got lost among the Hills. They were led by a man named Sherwood, an old prospector who came hyer with a map on buckskin which he had picked up somewhere on his travels. They found the lead and began to work it. After awhile they discovered that somebody had been there before them, for when they struck a certain place, the ground gave way and two of the party were killed by falling into a pit. It was a gold pit, too, as I'll show you, Jasper."

"But Sherwood and the rest?" asked Jasper James, who had become strangely interested in Dread Don's story.

"I'm gettin' thar," continued the gold camp sport. "The reds came down on the whole party one night, and killed all, as they supposed. Then they went to work and shut the mine up, and covered all traces of it. Matters war in this condition when we got a grip on the secret. We got after Sherwood who war still living with two daughters, one of whom war a widow with one child, a daughter. We played for that map with all the power and shrewdness we could muster. Mica Marle and I made up the hands and led the game, but it was no go. Sherwood did not care for the bonanza, but he would not part with the map. We tried to reach it through the daughters, and thar is no telling what we didn't do, Jasper, but the bonanza remained as far from our hands as ever. Then we played our last hand."

Dread Don looked into Jasper James's face, and shut his hands madly, as he went on:

"In the last play old Sherwood went under—no matter how—but the women got the map. Then we made a cage for the birds, and caught 'em, too. We got the map at last, but after some of the hardest work I ever did. We came

hyer and found the bonanza. Red Blade sprung into existence over it, and we war getting ready to work the find when who should come but one of the birds."

Jasper James uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"I war looking for the angel Azrael first," laughed Dread Don; "so war Mica Marle. Before she got hyer herself she sent a dead hand—from the cage, I suspect—with a bowie run through it. It war a challenge that we had to meet, and we've met it. The tigress I mentioned awhile ago war Dora Sherwood, called when she came, Perdita. She war the old man's unmarried daughter."

"What became of the widow's child?" asked Jasper James.

"Of Ruby? Oh, she disappeared suddenly," was the reply. "The widow never got out of the cage. Montez, the New Mexican, came up with Perdita; the two war pards. It took 'em a long time ter find Mica and me, but they found us at last. I used ter hear of a madwoman in Santa Fe—a woman whose hobby was a lost gold mine, and I have reason to believe that she was Dora Sherwood whose mind came around all right after some years. Now, with this introduction, Jasper James, I am going to give you an idea of what we have hyer."

If Dread Don could have seen the eyes of his new recruit as he turned away, he might have been startled by their keen glitter; but he did not look, but led the way down the opening which the removal of the cabin-floor had revealed.

The two men went down into the pit till they struck solid ground, where Dread Don turned on the light of the lantern he carried and swung it above his head.

"We ar' now under Red Blade," he said, turning to Jasper James. "We are in the bonanza Sherwood and his pards war workin' when the reds swooped down upon 'em and put an end to the work. These narrow passageways are gold walled. See hyer!"

Dread Don reached up and broke a piece of rock from the rough wall and handed it to Jasper James, then he eyed his new recruit intently while he examined it.

"You are right. The bonanza is worth fighting for," he said.

The desperado sport laughed and led the way into a little chamber, whose ceiling could not be seen by the lantern-light.

All at once a noise seemed to come through the walls to the ears of the two men.

Jasper James saw Dread Don start slightly.

"The boys are down in the false hole on their hunt for the amulet belonging to Montez," the gold-camp boss said. "A sound goes a long ways under ground in this place."

"It must," said Jasper James, leaning toward one of the walls.

"I cannot hear them now, though. Mebbe they have found the amulet."

"They must have it. Now let me show you the wildcats' den."

"What's that?"

"Come and see."

Dread Don led the way from the little chamber down a very narrow passage, and entered a small room whose rough ceiling made them stoop. Suddenly he caught Jasper James's wrist.

"It's sudden death to walk in hyer," he said, and then he swung the lantern forward.

Almost at the very feet of Jasper James was a circular opening about three feet in diameter. The darkness that it held seemed palpable, and a damp odor came up to the two pards.

"This is one of the mysteries of the bonanza," said Dread Don. "We once heard wildcats fighting down thar, which told us that the mine must have another outlet than the one in my shanty. We explored the place, but found nothing, still the cats came thar to fight."

A singular light came into Jasper James's eyes while he gazed into the opening, and he seemed to be listening for a repetition of the fight mentioned.

"We will go back now," said the boss of Red Blade. "I am anxious to know what success the boys had searching for the amulet. So this bonanza is worth fighting for, Jasper?"

"I should say it is," was the reply. "When it is opened, Custer and Deadwood will come."

"Let them come!" flashed Dread Don. "We will stake off our claim, and woe to the man who lifts a hand to take it away. It is all ours. We have played years for it; we have mastered the Sherwoods, old and young; we have just finished the tigress and her pard. Let them come! If it must be Red Blade against Custer and Deadwood, with the big bonanza for the prize, the sooner we play the red game out, the better."

There was no answer and Dread Don conducted Jasper James back to the main corridor and thence into his own cabin again.

The new recruit had decided to retire to the Full Deck Hotel for the night, and Dread Don parted from him at the door of his shanty.

"I'm all right so far," he laughed to himself, as he walked toward Keno Keifer's establishment. "The chief of the Clan doesn't dream who I am. I belong to the Cool Clan myself. It is the boldest step I have ever taken, but the

game is worth the candle! Bless your sweet soul, tigress of Red Blade, you'd flay me alive if you suspected my identity."

The speaker was almost at the door of the hotel when he was accosted by a boy about seventeen, who reined in a heated horse before him.

"Dread Don, eh?" said the boy, leaning forward, "I have an important letter for you."

"All right," said the new man, stretching out his hand, and the boy drew forth a small packet and dropped it into it.

"I didn't expect to find you so soon, captain," he said. "I came down from Deadwood about as fast as I could without wings. Colonel Snowdrop told me to come as if my life was at stake. I left after the stage, but a broken girth delayed me a little while."

The man called Jasper James laid one hand on the bridle of the boy's horse.

"You shall be paid well for your services," he said. "Come with me now."

"All right, captain. I'm your huckleberry for the present."

The next moment Jasper James was leading the horse away and he did not pause until he had reached a spot beyond Red Blade, and on the Deadwood trail.

"Here," he said, handing the boy some gold coin. "Take this and go back, but wait till I have read the message."

The speaker struck a match and opened the packet, then in the light of the little pine stick, he read:

"DREAD DON:—

"For Heaven's sake be on your guard. A man left here in the last stage for Red Blade. He is dangerous from the ground up. He plays against you all for the big bonanza, and calls himself Jasper James. Watch, watch—KILL!"

"SNOWDROP."

Jasper James looked up with a smile.

"Now go," he said to the boy.

CHAPTER XXII.

A COOL INTERFERENCE.

COLONEL SNOWDROP then had not got far from Red Blade, and his sympathies were still with Dread Don if we must judge from the message which fell into Jasper James's hands.

If the colonel could have seen the delight with which the Cool Clan's new recruit read his letter he would have fully believed that he was indeed the dangerous man he had called him.

The boy was going back to Deadwood to report to Snowdrop that he had safely delivered the important message, and Jasper James was on his way to the Full Deck Hotel.

"My life was at stake while the message was in the boy's hands," he said to himself. "It has been taken from the balances now, and I will see that it is made secure."

Nobody seemed to suspect that he was the dangerous man described by the colonel, and he went to his room in Red Blade's only hotel without a bit of suspicion directed at him by any of its people.

He had for his room the apartment at the head of the stairs. It looked out upon a porch that ran nearly the whole front of the building and gave the possessor a fair view of the main street for some distance.

Jasper James had not destroyed the message; on the contrary, he had carefully preserved it, and when he found himself alone he read it again.

"So I was seen to leave Deadwood by the stage, was I?" he laughed. "I did not see anything of the colonel myself, but he was on the lookout as this letter shows. If I had known it, my dear colonel, Jasper James would have paid you a visit before leaving. Why didn't you come up and tell me that I was running into a hornets' nest? No, you would not do that, but you must send a boy at all speed to Red Blade advising Dread Don to make short work of his new recruit. Beware, colonel! You are accounted sleek, but you may find the fingers of Jasper James at your throat before you are much older."

Jasper James was still at the little table near the window when he heard a loud shout in the street below and the next second a dozen followed it.

"Captain, mebbe you'd better come down," said a voice at the foot of the stair. "The Clan has caught a panther, and you kin see fun in Red Blade ef you ar' partial to it."

It was the voice of Keno Keifer and almost before it had ceased to sound Jasper James was at the door.

"What have they caught?—a panther did you say?" he asked.

"A human, two-legged one," was the reply. "We used to call him Reptile Ralph—"

Jasper James uttered a strange exclamation as Keno Keifer drew back.

"I'll come down," he said, and the following minute he was coming down the steps.

"The man is a fool if he has allowed himself to get back into the clutches of the Clan," he said to himself in half-audible tones. "Does he want to try me? He promised—well, no difference what, I have already discovered that humanity is devilish uncertain."

As he passed into the bar-room he was accosted by the barkeeper with a laugh.

"He'll get a mighty poor shake with the Clan. The blood of the pards is hot—hotter than Tartarus water, I tell you, Jasper James. Why, the fool ought to have known that he is on the outlaw list posted in Paradise Phil's ranch. And after waltzing into the place and driving his bowie through the placard, too! They've got him out thar. Hear 'em!"

Jasper James went to the front door and stepped upon the little porch. The next moment his ears were assailed by a number of voices which directed him to a group of men in the moonlighted street a few rods away and near a large tree that made splendid shade during the summer days.

As he looked at the group the hotel was approached by one man from it, and when he saw Jasper James on the porch he gave a low exclamation of pleasure.

"Hyer you are without calling," he said. "We have in our hands one of the outlaws of Red Blade. As you are one of us, I want you to see how the Clan deals with its proscribed."

The speaker was Dread Don himself, and Jasper James walked with him to the group near the tree.

"This is the man," said the captain of the Clan, waving his hand at a little, but well-built fellow, who was guarded by several men who had revolvers in their hands. "He is known hyer as Reptile Ralph. Not big, but dangerous."

The last sentence was spoken in a tone too low to reach the prisoner's ears, and Dread Don added:

"This man wants the secret. He has been hunting the bonanza for years. We cannot afford to let him go."

Jasper James at that moment caught the eye of Reptile Ralph, and if a look of recognition passed between the two men the new member of the Clan showed no sign of it.

"I'm no infant," cried Reptile Ralph at this moment, taking his eyes from Jasper James and facing the crowd from which judging from the eyes that confronted him he could expect no mercy. "Mebbe I war a fool for comin' back to ther old shanty when I did, but I'm not golt' ter squeal about it. I'm outlawed, an' I know it. You've got my name posted below the man called Montez, an' I'm in your hands. Gentlemen ov Red Blade, you know what you intend doin' with Reptile Ralph the man who druv a bowie through yer poster, an' thar warn't a man in ther house at ther time with grit enough above his boots ter take it up."

Straight as an arrow before the Red Blade toughs stood the little man, his chest swelled out and his eyes full of fearless defiance.

A little apart from the Cool Clan were the other inhabitants of Red Blade who had been called to the spot with the prospects for a hanging before them. It was evident that they had no thoughts of rescue; they knew better than to interfere in the lawless acts of Dread Don and pards, for they were Red Bladers by the sufferance of the gold band.

"What shall it be?" suddenly said Dread Don to the group of pistoled men who were guarding Reptile Ralph with the eyes of lynxes.

"Death!" said one and then the others echoed the dread word—"Death!"

"What say you, Reptile?"

"Oh, I'm not votin' in these proceedin's, I'm disbarred," said the little man with a grin. "But I will remark just hyer that if I am given half a chance, I'll face the hull gang with pleasure."

"What do you call half a chance?"

"A revolver in my hand and ten feet between us."

"Oho!" cried some one, and then the whole crowd laughed.

As for Reptile Ralph, his eyes flashed as they suddenly wandered back to Jasper James who happened to catch their intense light.

"I reckon I'm not ter hev ther chance," he said.

"No, not to-night."

"Then, never."

At a signal from Dread Don a rope suddenly appeared and a bronze hand hung it toward the tree.

"By that?" grated Reptile Ralph when he saw the cord and divined instantly the use to which it was to be put.

"That is the outlaw's sentence always," answered Dread Don.

The lips of the little man met firmly but he made no reply.

"Has this man committed murder?"

In an instant every face was turned to the speaker, and the Cool Clan saw the question quivering the lips of Jasper James.

Astonishment looked from Dread Don's eyes.

"Where I came from we never noosed men who had neither stolen nor killed. 'Of course, I don't know the man yonder; I look for the first time into his eyes. Whom did he kill?"

The Cool Clan looked at Dread Don, whose countenance betokened his surprise.

"To tell the truth, Jasper, we don't know that he's killed anybody."

"Did he steal?"

"Not exactly."

"But you want his blood—must have it, eh?"

The next instant Dread Don went toward Jasper James in a hasty stride, and his hand, dropping suddenly, touched his wrist.

"He's dangerous from the ground up. He wants a share in the bonanza," he said, in low tones. "By Heavens! we must throw all the obstacles from our trail. It is nearly clear now; this man is the only disturber we need fear."

"Why," said Jasper James, "he's a mite!" And he was, compared to the athletic proportions of the men who wanted his life. "Why don't you banish him?"

"Men don't stay banished in these diggin's."

"It is because they are not always shot when they come back—shot on sight."

"We propose to deal with this one now; no waste of ammunition on him hereafter." And Dread Don went back to the little group of willing executioners. "We don't force our new pard, Jasper James, to take a hand in the first act of the Clan after his inauguration. March the prisoner under the rope!"

Two hands touched the arms of Reptile Ralph as this command was given, and he was wheeled facing the tree.

"Forward now!"

"Not yet! I don't like to be captious, men of Red Blade, but I'm so wedded to the rules of the Red Ring, to which I belonged for five years in a camp as good as this, that I can't see a man dragged to death for no blood-letting. Give him to me."

The Cool Clan sent their fingers to the triggers of their deadly weapons. The quick eye of Jasper James seemed to catch every movement.

"Do you mean to enforce your demand?" said Dread Don, and as he spoke he stepped toward the new recruit, whom he transfixed with a look.

"I want him."

"Mebbe—"

The leader of the Clan broke his own sentence.

"Do you think I am the pard of Reptile Ralph?" cried Jasper James. "Ask him. Put him on his oath and ask him if he ever saw Jasper James before now. I am for justice, but not for murder. Give that man to me, and he shall turn his back upon Red Blade within ten minutes."

"But he'll come back."

Jasper James burst into a laugh that was cutting in its derision.

"A piging against the Cool Clan! By the harp of Orpheus! this would convulse Dead-wood."

Once more Dread Don went back to his men. His face had a purple hue; his eyes were blazing balls, and those nearest him heard his teeth grind.

"Give him to Jasper James," he said.

The Clan did so reluctantly, and the next moment Reptile Ralph had passed from the shadow of the noose to the rescuer's side.

"I'll keep my part of the agreement," Jasper James said to Dread Don. "Reptile Ralph leaves Red Blade to-night. If he comes back he is to be shot on sight. Here. Come with me."

The hand of the new recruit closed about the late prisoner's arm and he was led away in presence of the whole crowd. They were watched in silence till they vanished, and then Dread Don said under his breath:

"I have let my new man beat me before Red Blade! I am the fool."

Meanwhile, Jasper James had led the astonished little man from the main part of the camp, and the two were on the road that led to Dead-wood.

Not until then did the hand drop from his arm.

"In Jupiter's name! what kind of a game ar' you playin' now?" exclaimed Reptile Ralph, staring into his rescuer's face.

"It is no difference what," was the answer. "You know what will follow your return to Red Blade."

"Well, I'm goin' back!" flashed the little man. "I don't know exactly what you're up to an' I don't care. I know that you can't play a game alone ag'in' the Clan an' win. You've helped me, to-night, an' I claim ther right ter help you."

"I don't want help. You can't keep cool; you go off like powder. Keep away from me!" and the next moment Jasper James had turned his back on Reptile Ralph.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRAIL OF THE LOST.

"Now," said Jasper to himself, when he turned from the half-bewildered Reptile Ralph, "now I will play another game of my own."

He went back to Red Blade and discovered that Dread Don and pards had adjourned to Paradise Phil's saloon, where they were discussing the last event of the camp.

Satisfying himself that they were all there, he glided to the captain's cabin and entered.

"I will see what I can discover in the depths of the bonanza," he laughed, in audible tones, as

he fell to removing the boards of the floor as Dread Don had done a few moments before in order to show him the lost mine.

Jasper James soon dropped into the opening and replaced the floor before he went down the rough steps.

Groping his way down the dark corridor, his hand came in contact with the lantern used by the Red Blade boss, and a minute later it was illumining the narrow ways of the old mine.

There was something striking in the spectacle of the new recruit moving along, a lantern in one hand and a revolver in the other. More than once he stopped and listened with one ear against the wall, but silence, and that the most profound, was the sole reward.

"That sound which Dread Don said came from the Clan searching the false shaft for Montez and his pard did not deceive me. The men have not been there yet to-night. It came from the lips of some one. The captain of the Clan could not deceive me."

Thus spoke the bronzed explorer of the mine as he pressed on, listening at the wall of every cavern he entered and not leaving it until he could hear no sound.

He found the Wildcats' Den as if by accident, and his lantern swung over it for a few moments as he tried to see bottom.

"There is a current of air here. I can feel it," he said, and then he picked up a stone and dropped it into the opening.

It soon sent up a sound of its striking, and Jasper James started up with a light cry.

"My rope will let me safely down," he exclaimed. "If the wildcats can get in here from the mountains I can get out."

The rope, which he produced from under his coat was small but strong, and he was not long in fastening one end to a rock. A few moments later he swung himself over the brink of the opening and was swinging in mid-air with the lantern strung on his left arm and resembling an oscillating star.

Hand over hand down the rope went the cool man, ready for an encounter of any kind, for he had loosened bowie and revolvers before starting on the descent.

As the depth of the den was about thirty feet, he soon touched ground, and the next moment had leaped clear of the cord.

All at once something approached the adventurer; he stripped his lantern from his arm held it up and drew his revolver.

"Friend or foe?" said a voice that sent a thrill through Jasper James and in the lantern-light he saw the muzzle of a six shooter and behind it the blazing eyes of a giant.

"Montez, by the stars!" cried Jasper James.

"Well, what of it? Answer my question and be quick about it? Friend or foe?"

The right hand of the Cool Clan's new recruit flew to his face and the next moment his whiskers disappeared.

"Friend," he said with a smile. "I am Full Hand Frank."

Montez the new Mexican lowered his revolver and stepped forward.

"How came you hyer?" he exclaimed.

"By the way of Dread Don's cabin, but you—"

"I came down the false shaft!" laughed Montez. "The fools do not know one-half of the secrets of this bonanza."

"But they believe they riddled you after the death of Chiquapin."

"I will undeceive them in a manner that will convince them all," grated Perdita's pard. "Riddled, eh? Hold your lantern up hyer, Frank? Do I look like a bullet-riddled individual?"

"Not much, Montez," said Full Hand Frank looking at the stalwart man who confronted him.

"So I got the dead drop on Chiquapin, did I?"

"Yes; and Mica Marle also, eh, Montez?"

A smile came to the pard's lips and a flash to his eyes.

"Do they say so?" he asked.

"Dread Don does," was the reply. "He says that his right-bower was killed for his amulet."

"And that I have it?"

"Yes."

"I never saw that article on which Mica set such store," was the answer. "Dread Don is mistaken for once in his life at least. If Mica's amulet was in his possession at the time of his death somebody else got it. It was very valuable, Frank."

"Worth three hundred thousand to the holder."

Montez relapsed into a thoughtful silence during which the young sport eyed him intently.

If he had not the valuable amulet, who had? The interrogative came suddenly into Full Hand Frank's head, and stuck there.

"Let it go!" suddenly cried the New Mexican. "The end of the Cool Clan has begun. What brought you down hyer, Frank?"

The young sport did not hesitate. He advanced a step and laid his fingers on Montez's sleeve.

"I am hunting Ruby," he said.

The pard of the tigress started.

"You mean Edith," he replied.

"She came here as Ruby Ryan, in the stage with Colonel Snowdrop."

"Who says so?"

"Dread Don."

"Where is she?"

"Somewhere in the bonanza, as I verily believe. I was down here once before to-night with Dread Don. We heard a sound like a distant human voice. It came through the wall of a little chamber we were in at the time. He said it was made by the Clan looking for your lady in the false shaft, but it was one voice, not several."

"Where did you hear it?"

"I cannot tell you. This mine is a perfect labyrinth to me. I have listened in every cavern I have struck on this search. I may not have found the right one."

"What was it like? You saw it by the lantern no doubt."

In a sentence Full Hand Frank described the place where he had heard the strange sound as of some captive calling for help, and Montez took from an inner pocket a small piece of pasteboard, on which were intensely black lines on a white ground.

"This is worth more than Mica Marle's amulet," he said, looking up with a smile. "It is the key to this underground mystery."

Full Hand Frank, who leaned forward with curiosity filling his eyes, saw numerous little black arrows and figures on the chart. The arrows did not all point one way, but seemed jumbled together in useless confusion.

"Aha! I have found it," suddenly cried Montez. "We will have to try the strength of your card, Frank."

The chart disappeared beneath the New Mexican's coat again, and he laid his hand on the rope that hung from the top of the pit.

"One moment," said Full Hand Frank. "Where is Perdita?"

The New Mexican gave him a quick look that puzzled him still more.

"Men with good 'hands' will make poor plays sometimes," laughed Montez. "Now for the girl you call Ruby Ryan."

Not another word about Perdita, and Full Hand Frank did not repeat the question.

A moment later he was holding the lantern up, while Perdita's pard was climbing the rope, and when the top had been gained he followed.

Taking the light, Montez started off at a brisk gait, closely followed by the younger sport.

"A good deal of this mining was done before Sherwood and his pards came hyer," he said over his shoulder at one time as he pressed on. "Nature did it years and years ago. The whole of Red Blade is undermined. A little dynamite rightly used would engulf the camp. Do you want the bonanza?"

As he uttered this question, Montez wheeled and faced Full Hand Frank. The lantern held forward almost touched his face.

"I had not thought of that," the young sport said.

"It is yours if you say so," laughed Montez.

"We don't intend to touch it for ourselves. We came here for life, not gold."

"We?" the young sport unconsciously echoed aloud.

Montez said nothing, but turned and went on again.

Five minutes later he swung the lantern above his head.

"Is this the place?" he asked, looking at Frank.

The false Jasper James inspected the little natural cavern for a moment, and answered in the affirmative.

"I thought so," said Montez. "Now, through which wall did the voice seem to come?"

Full Hand Frank stepped quickly across the room, and laid his hand on the wall at a certain place.

"I heard it while I stood here."

"We shall see."

The next moment Montez put his lips close to the wall and shouted. Then he drew back and looked at the young sport, who was listening intently.

The sound of the cry died away, but no answer came back. Montez repeated the experiment, with the same result.

"It was a human cry I heard," said Full Hand Frank.

"It was the girl, then," was the reply. "We will have to look for her!"

"Can you find all the apartments of this mine?"

"All, for a thousand!"

The two men went out, and were among the corridors again.

All at once Full Hand Frank touched Montez on the sleeve.

"You heard that?"

"Yes; the banded fools are in the false shaft," he said, with a smile. "They want to find Montez and his female pard, and the lost amulet. Let them hunt!"

"It all depends on this man," ejaculated Full Hand Frank as he followed Montez once more. "He knows this mine as if he had spent his life in it. If Ruby is to be found it must be through him."

Montez wound in and out the corridors like a

bloodhound on the trail. The lantern shone like a star amid the gloom and enabled Frank to see the resolute and tireless man who carried it.

"I wonder if he is anything to Perdita," muttered the young sport. "I have known them both for some time, but they never seemed more than friends. While she was mad in Santa Fe and raving about the lost mine he watched her like a hawk. I wouldn't want him hot on my track."

Montez stopped suddenly once more and said over his shoulder with a light chuckle:

"We will try this place."

Full Hand Frank leaned forward and saw where the lantern light fell a door set firmly in the wall.

He greeted the discovery with a cry and a look at Montez.

"This used to be somebody's treasure-room," the New Mexican said answering the young sport's look. "The inside of this door is faced with stone like the wall. Now we will see what lies beyond it."

It took the strength of the New Mexican to open the door from the outside. Frank held the lantern while he worked.

"A child could get out if he could find the door but it takes a man to get in," he laughed as the door of heavy plank which was well preserved opened slowly and disclosed another chamber.

Montez took the lantern from Frank and stepped forward. The young sport was at his heels.

"We ought to find something here, Montez," he said.

"We have found it already!"

A moment later the New Mexican came to a halt and his lantern shot forward.

Full Hand Frank uttered a wild cry.

"My God! we are too late! The girl is dead!" he exclaimed.

Montez stooped and held the lantern over the human body that lay on the floor of the cavern. It was the body of a beautiful young girl whose loose hair framed in golden beauty her pale face.

"It is Ruby Ryan!" cried Frank. "Is she dead?"

The bronze fingers of the New Mexican were already at the girl's wrist, and a minute later he looked up into his companion's face.

"Dread Don's blue-eyed viper will yet show her sting!" he laughed.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A HOTSPUR'S WORK.

"I MADE no promise. I'm a fool if I go! Didn't I go in among 'em all an' leave a bowie stickin' through their list ov outlawry? I won't go, but by the Eternal! come what may, I'll stay hyer an' play my game out!"

Some men are bound to be fools under all circumstances, and of this class appeared the man who walked into Red Blade while he spoke the words just recorded.

Reptile Ralph had been rescued from the noose of the Clan by Jasper James, or Full Hand Frank; he had been taken from the camp by his preserver and told to quit the scene of danger. Headstrong, and with the death of Noisy Nick ranking in his heart, and eager to find the secret of the bonanza which he had hunted for years, he had refused to take advice; for he was now sneaking down Red Blade's main street with a revolver within easy reach.

He knew that he had the Cool Clan against him, but what does a desperado care?

It was the night after the events related in the chapter just closed.

Reptile Ralph headed straight toward Dread Don's cabin, and went in without the slightest ceremony. In his hand was a cocked revolver, and his eye took in the whole interior of the place at a glance.

"Empty!—just my luck!" growled the little man, in tones of disappointment. "I came hyer for ther secret ef I hed ter shoot it out o' ther Red Blade boss. Spile his o'nery picture! I'll find him if I have ter sift Hades! An' Colonel Snowdrop—the man who shot Noisy? I'd give my hair ef he war hyer just now."

Fuming over his disappointment, the mad little man went out. He knew where to find Dread Don if he was not at his cabin.

The next moment he was approaching Paradise Phil's, his anger not one whit abated.

"Jehosaphat! thar's ther pigmy what daggered ther placard t'other night," exclaimed the man behind the bar.

The two dozen men in the saloon saw Reptile Ralph at that moment.

"Hands up, every mother's son ov you!" he cried, planting himself firmly beyond the threshold, with his arms thrust forward and a revolver at the end of each. "What does this saint keer for ropes an' threats? I'm back in Red Blade as big as life, an' ther meanest tiger I ever saw. Had me last night, eh? Wal, I should softly remark you had, my mountain daisies. Whar's Dread Don, boss tiger ov ther jungle?"

Reptile Ralph had already searched the house for the Red Blade boss, but he was not to be seen.

"Slunk, has he?" he went on. "Why didn't he wait for Reptile Ralph, the serpent, whose

head has been bruised, but not enough ter curtail his usefulness?"

The astonished Red Bladers stood spellbound before the muzzles of the leveled weapons. Back of them were two eyes that glistened dangerously, and the quickest fingers in camp were at the triggers.

"My question hasn't been answered," he continued. "Whar is Don?"

Some one in the crowd made reply:

"He's not in camp. You won't find the cap'n hyer, Reptile."

"I see that," laughed the little man.

At that moment the light that fell beyond the open door revealed the figure of a man, and the next instant it leaped into the saloon, and a pair of long arms encircled Reptile Ralph.

The crowd set up a whoop of joy, and surged forward, but all at once it came to a halt, for Reptile Ralph twisted himself most dexterously from the embrace, and sprung to one side, covering his assailant in the twinkling of an eye.

"I'm an eel among eels!" he laughed, and with the last word one of the revolvers flashed in the assailant's face, and he went back to fall at the door, dead!

Almost before the little man's victim had reached the door, the two revolvers were poked into the faces of the awe-struck crowd.

"The taste ov blood makes me mad, you know that!" he hissed. "I'm one ov Red Blade's posted outlaws—ther one thet's come back!"

Somebody in the rear of the crowd shouted out derisively:

"Shoot ther outlaw!"

Reptile Ralph's teeth cracked behind the last word.

"Show me that galoot!" he exclaimed. "Step to one side, you men next to ther counter, I've got an eye on the hunker."

Threatened by the two revolvers the men of Red Blade obeyed. They knew that before a man who had lost his head it was death to disobey.

When the movement had been made, there stood before Reptile Ralph a slender man, whose sandy mustache dropped over a pair of colorless lips, but he did not quail before the blazing eyes of the camp's pigmy.

Everybody knew Slim Ivan, the man who was on the edge of the grave with consumption, and whose flushed cheeks even then showed the ravages of the dread terror. He had been one of the noted sports of the Shasta country, had escaped death in a hundred forms, and had never feared him.

The whole camp with all its roughness had nursed Slim Ivan with the tenderness of a woman. Red Blade's love, if love it had, was with the man who, with death at his heart-strings, faced the still smoking revolver of the little man.

The crowd did not know who had spoken till its stepping aside had left the consumptive standing alone. There was a sudden move toward Slim Ivan as if to shield him, but the voice of Reptile Ralph rung sternly out:

"Stand whar ye ar! I'll deal with the man who wanted yer outlaw shot!" he said.

"Shame!" said some one, in a whisper that reached the little man.

He singled out the speaker with a lightning glance, but only for half a second.

Did Slim Ivan know that he was doomed?

All at once one of the revolvers was lifted a few inches and then—

"I make no distinction when I've tasted blood!" grated Reptile Ralph.

The weapon spoke sharply at the end of the sentence, and with the report the consumptive of Red Blade wheeled half-way round, threw high his emaciated hands, and dropped—dead!

Red Blade had witnessed foul deeds before, but this was the foulest.

The crowd seemed paralyzed; not one man had dreamed that Reptile Ralph would carry his madness this far.

"When I'm wanted I'll be around," laughed the little man in the faces of the Red Bladers. "I'm no giant, but let this prove that I'm a regular cyclone all the same."

He walked toward the door and passed out: so horror-stricken was the crowd that not a revolver covered him. A quick hand and eye could have dropped Reptile Ralph over the body of his first victim.

The first movement of the crowd was toward the body of Slim Ivan. One look was enough; the hole between his lusterless blue eyes told that the bullet had done its work.

Then a shout of vengeance shook the rafters of Paradise Phil's place. Twenty revolvers clicked at the same moment, and as many men made a dash for the door. They poured pell-mell into the street, but the murderer was already gone.

Red Blade had the first mob it had known. It rushed toward Reptile Ralph's cabin, where he had cremated Noisy Nick, and swarmed across the threshold regardless of the fact that a man inside could drop a dozen dead.

But it was empty; the little lamp was out and the interior of the shanty was entirely denuded of furniture. There remained however the sickening odor of the boaster's cremation.

"Not hyer! Ransack ther camp!" cried some one.

Out into the street burst the mob, yelling for blood.

"I heated 'em, didn't I?" said a person who heard these cries from a spot just beyond the lost cabin of Red Blade. "They mustn't fool with Reptile Ralph when he's on the war-path!"

"What have you done?"

A hand dropped upon the shoulders of the little man and he heard these words at his ear.

Quick as a flash Reptile Ralph wheeled and threw up his revolver, but a hand clutched his wrist and he was confronted by a man who had a full black beard and was his physical superior.

"Is it you?" asked the little man.

"Yes. You heard me. What have you done?"

"Riled Red Blade. Don't yer hear 'em?" grinned Ralph, throwing back his head.

"How?"

"With ther dropper."

"Fool!" was the cutting epithet. "I saved you from the noose last night. I gave the Clan my word that you would not come back—"

"I'm hyer, ain't I, Jasper James?"

"I see," said the little man's confronter between clinched teeth. "You had to come back and show your teeth."

"It looks that way."

"Whom did you kill?"

"Sandy Saul, one ov ther Clan, for ther first, an' Slim Ivan next."

"The consumptive?" cried Jasper James, horrified.

"The man with paper lungs!" sneered Reptile Ralph.

Jasper James's grip grew tighter on the wrist he clutched; his eyes suddenly took on a fierce glare.

"I'd think of shooting a woman first!" he hissed. "You miserable wretch! I hate myself when I think that I once took your hand in a pledge of pardship. I dissolve it here. You ought to be flung into the clutches of Slim Ivan's friends."

"Mebbe you'd like ter do it," cried Reptile Ralph.

"For a penny I would!"

"And hear me tell Red Blade that Jasper James is Full Hand Frank, one ov its four outlaws! Oh, yes! Go an' toss me ter ther tigers, Full Hand!"

"I will! The killing of Slim Ivan is enough."

Reptile Ralph glared at the young sport and drew back, but there was no breaking from the strong grip.

Full Hand Frank took a step forward but stopped and faced Ralph again.

"Why did you shoot Dread Don?"

"He warn't with ther crowd. He war ther game I wanted. Give me a chance an' I'll cash his life checks at ther first opportunity, his an' ther colonel's."

"To find Snowdrop you'll have to go to Frisco."

"Ther deuce! I'd go, though. For a shot at ther man who dropped Noisy, I'd go to Pekin. Hang ther bonanza anyhow! Give me a chance, Full Hand."

Full Hand Frank made no reply.

A few rods away the mad mob of Red Blade was thundering through the camp for the man who had shot in cold blood one whom he should have protected.

"I'll keep you from the mob on one condition, Reptile," he said, at length.

"Wal?"

"It is that you leave the Hills at once."

"Forever?"

"Yes. Or, upon a second condition, that when the excitement cools you'll come here and stand trial."

Reptile Ralph burst into a laugh.

"I'm no fool, Full Hand," he exclaimed. "Stand trial before a packed jury? I guess not!"

"You'll accept the first proposition, then?"

"I think I'll go to Frisco."

The young sport's hand dropped from Reptile Ralph's wrist and the little man stepped back free.

For a moment he listened to the movements of the mob, then he turned and shook his fist at the camp.

"Mebbe I'll give you jackals a chance ter get even one of these times, but not ter-night," he said. "I am still for ther bonanza an' Colonel Snowdrop's life. You hear me, Full Hand?"

"This is not according to the proposition," said Full Hand Frank. "You were to quit the Hills forever—"

"When I got ready ter!" interrupted the little desperado, drawing back as the stalwart young sport sprang forward. "Good-night, Jasper Jeems. Mebbe we'll compare notes ag'in at ther end ov ther game. We didn't stay pards long, eh? All because I dropped ther daisy with ther tissue lungs!"

A curse swept over the young sport's lips and Reptile Ralph darted off.

Full Hand Frank threw up his revolver, but let it fall immediately.

"Let the fool go," he said. "Red Blade will get him yet."

CHAPTER XXV.

FORCED FROM THE BATTLE.

THE mob did not find Reptile Ralph, and was forced to spend its anger without him in Paradise Phil's saloon.

If the little man had been captured, he would have met a doom as swift as it would have been terrible, for the death of Slim Ivan the consumptive, had brought the passions of Red Blade to their highest pitch.

The camp had been thoroughly scoured, but in vain; the little man had effected his escape, and the result was a thousand mad threats against him.

Dread Don's cabin remained empty all that night. The men who searched the false shaft for Montez, were forced to report that they had not found the sallow man, that they had discovered half-way down the old shaft an opening in the wall, that led into the depths of the bonanza. The network of old beams and old timber that seemed to fill the shaft, had had a use long before Sherwood and his party found the mine, and it helped to conceal the hole in the wall.

Dread Don heard this report with closed lips and eyes, that spoke volumes of rage. It told him that Montez was still at large, and that the Cool Clan had to contend with a man who might prove more than its match. He went down into the mine himself, down among the narrow corridors and dark chambers; he threw the light of his lantern hither and thither. If Montez had escaped, might he not be still in the bonanza?

Perdita dead at the bottom of the old shaft executed by Mica Marle's hand, as the Clan told Dread Don, would never wield another dagger. He had that woman out of the way, and the daggered hand had ceased to be a factor in the game.

Dread Don went to the door that opened into Ruby Ryan's prison. He listened there but did not open it. If he had he would have been greeted by one of the surprises of his life.

He followed the corridors to the Wildcats' Den, and descending into it by means of a lasso, he found boot-marks in the rather soft floor.

"Hello! I've struck a trail at last. Montez has been hyer!"

The captain of the Clan followed the tracks until he began to utter exclamations of surprise. He found a narrow corridor he had missed before, and the tracks went on and on, until at last a streak of starlight fell athwart his face.

He now knew how the mountain beasts had entered the old mine, and one of the mysteries of the bonanza was solved.

"I've got that yellow fellow to grapple with," said Dread Don shutting his teeth hard. "He will show his fangs now that we have dealt with his tigress pard. After him the bonanza will be worked; then we will beat back Custer and Deadwood if they come with Red Blade as a unit."

Half an hour later, or when the moon round and silvery stood over the mountain camp, the boss of Red Blade was far from the newly-discovered entrance to the mine.

He had followed a trail which despite the night was perceptible, and he stood on the stage-road between Custer City and the camp.

At that same moment some distance from the spot a young girl was listening to what a man was saying.

"I felt that you were Edith the moment I heard that Dread Don had laid hands on you," he said.

"You came to Red Blade as Ruby Ryan."

"And if I get a chance I will go back there. You will have to watch me," smiled the girl who was indeed the captive of the chamber underground.

"Alone?"

"Why not? I came here alone."

"Not exactly. Colonel Snowdrop was with you."

"Not as my friend," said Ruby quickly. "Nor did I know that in the stage was a box that contained a human hand pierced by a dagger."

A smile appeared at the corners of the man's mouth.

"When were you going to begin your work?" he asked.

"I would have begun soon if Dread Don had not captured me."

"It would have been a foolish play."

"Foolish, Montez? It would have been vengeance."

The lips of the girl shut firmly behind the last word.

"I grant that, but the whole Clan would have been down upon you before the smoke of your revolver had cleared away."

"But not before I had settled with the man who orphaned Edith Morgan!"

Montez did not speak for a moment!

"A girl," he said, "can't fight a whole camp; a dove has no show against a hawk."

"I have never been tried!" cried Ruby.

"You will not let me go back there and begin again."

"Would you go?"

"Give me a chance!"

Montez laughed.

"Not to-night, girl, not this eve," he said.

"Show me the woman whom you call Perdita then."

"Not now. Don't you know that she holds a dagger on Dread Don's steel waistcoat and that he afterward threw her to his lions?"

"I have heard you say so," said the girl.

"That after that," continued Montez, "the Clan, headed by Mica Marle, took her to the false shaft cabin and came away without her?"

"I have heard this from you; but you have never told me in words that Perdita is dead."

"Why need I say so after what has happened?" asked the New Mexican. "Do you think that Mica Marle would attempt to spare a woman who had tried to take his captain's life? My child, you don't want to go back to begin again the game you lost at the outset."

He leaned forward, and with one hand on her shoulder, looked into the soft eyes of the fair girl.

"My child," he repeated, "you must go to Custer and remain till the game has been played out."

"Played out by whom?" she exclaimed, looking into his bronzed face.

"Ask no questions," he answered, with a smile.

"If the Clan did throw Perdita into the false shaft, the game goes on."

"You intend to play it, then?"

He made no reply, but Ruby saw a brilliant light come into his eyes.

"Hark! the stage to Custer!" he suddenly exclaimed, catching the girl's wrist. "It comes in the nick of time. You will go down. A word to the driver and you will be landed there safely, and will find quarters at the best hotel, if you want them."

The rumble of the four-horse vehicle was distinctly heard, and the girl listened with the man who held her wrist.

"This is force work," she said, drawing back. "I am not to strike a blow for my mother?"

"We don't want you to be devoured by the lions. Thar is a bonanza for you if we play the game out. Why, girl, we will send you East or West a young bonanza queen!"

"I don't want gold. I came here for something else."

"Never mind. The stage is here. I'll surprise the driver, and for a moment, to him, we'll be a brace of road-agents. Thar! the whip cracks like a thirty-two! The man at the end of the lines is Custer Dick."

Montez held the girl's wrist while he drew her back to wait for the stage, which had rolled out of Red Blade a short time before and was fairly on the way to Custer.

"You are determined that I must leave the drama at this point," she said. "I am not to be allowed to avenge my mother. Are you not afraid that I will leave Custer and reappear on the scene?"

"We'll risk that," smiled Montez, and a minute later he stepped boldly into the trail and threw up his hat.

"Halt, thar!" he sung out loudly, and a man who held the lines that directed four horses fell back on his seat and uttered an exclamation of astonishment.

"I've got a passenger for you, Dick," continued Montez. "I won't detain you a minute, and—"

"Montez! by the gigantic horn-spoon!" interrupted the driver. "You kin load this vehicle with all the passengers you want ter. A female package, eh? Open the door, thar, some o' ye gents inside. Hyer's unexpected freight, an' almighty precious at that."

Montez led Ruby to the rear of the heavy stage, and somebody inside opened the door, and a hand helped the young girl in, after which the man from New Mexico clambered upon the fore-wheel and leaned toward the man in the box.

What passed between the two men did so in low tones, and when Montez got down, the long whip cracked above the ears of the leaders, and the heavy stage started off again.

Ruby found herself among half a dozen men, whose countenances she could not distinguish very well on account of the dim light.

Nobody seemed eager to strike up a conversation with the new and unexpected passenger, but she was eyed with a good deal of interest as the stage rattled on.

It was some time before the vehicle passed into the dominion of the moonlight, and away from the shadow of the high walls of the mountain passes.

All at once Ruby was struck by the intensity with which she was watched by one of the men, who completely filled one corner of the stage. He had his hat pulled down in a manner that partly hid his face, but for all that the girl became convinced that she had seen him before.

There was no further stopping till Custer Dick drew up in front of Custer City's best hotel, and sprung to the ground.

The male passengers hastened to disembark, and the man in the corner brushed Ruby and gave her a quick look as he came along.

She was the last passenger to get out, and the rough hand of Custer Dick handed her down with much gentleness.

For a moment she seemed to stand bewildered

before the crowd that eyed her with no little curiosity.

"They cannot keep me from the battle-ground by a play of this kind," she exclaimed. "I have an unfulfilled vow now registered above, and the hand of Montez shall not make me break it. I won't trouble Custer long. I have thought the whole ground over, and I am going back to strike Dread Don."

Just then the girl heard a footstep at her side, and as she turned quickly as if there was something dangerous in the sound, a hand touched her sleeve and a voice said:

"So you are the passenger we took aboard back yonder? By Jupiter! I did not expect to see you again after Dread Don marched you off!"

What could Ruby say?

She was confronted by the man who had watched her from the corner of the stage, and now with eyes blazing with unmistakable triumph he clutched her arm and was looking into her face.

"Colonel Snowdrop!" she exclaimed, for she could not keep back the name.

"Yes, my girl—Erastus Snowdrop," was the answer. "I am happy to meet you again. You met with no violence, I hope, at Dread Don's hands? Please consider me your protector from this moment. I am against the men who are against you. I have happened onto a fortune which I am going to share with you."

"With me?" cried the girl drawing back. "I cannot—"

"Oh, yes; you will accept it. I shall force it upon you, ha, ha! It was the luckiest find of my life. I go on down to Sidney, next stage, you know, and then to Frisco, where I take possession of the bonanza. I'll engage a seat for two. You shall be a bonanza princess of the coast."

He laughed in a manner that flushed Ruby's temples and made her start back.

"Unhand me!" she cried, jerking from his grasp. "I wouldn't go to Paradise with Colonel Erastus Snowdrop!"

He gave her a look that completely changed his countenance; in a moment he was fierceness itself.

"Don't be so 'fly,' my girl," he cried. "No one asked you to go to Paradise, but you may go to perdition with the colonel! This is Custer City and not Denver, all of which you may know. I mean business when I say that I am not going alone to Sidney. Your game against Dread Don has been played out. I hold the cards now, and a new bonanza is the stake. You hear me, Ruby? I am Colonel Snowdrop here, but elsewhere and in other days I have been Shasta Leon! You go with me to Frisco. Say no at your risk."

Ruby stood in the little square before the frame hotel, and the hand of Colonel Snowdrop had closed on her wrist like the jaws of a vise.

She had fallen into new clutches.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE NEW DEAL.

"THEY have lied to their boss!—to me! They have said that they finished Dora, or Perdita, the night I gave her to them and commanded that she should be thrown into the false shaft dead but now—now!—what? The tigress lives. I have undisputed evidence to that effect. They have lied to Dread Don."

The speaker, and the captain of the Cool Clan himself, stood in the center of his little cabin in Red Blade. He was in a tempest of anger as his looks showed, and with flashing eyes turned toward the door he threw out the words that began this chapter.

If Perdita was alive the Cool Clan her picked executioners had certainly lied to him. They had solemnly assured him that the woman had gone down the false shaft dead, and that Mica Marle was on his way to head-quarters with a report to that effect when the knife of an enemy overtook him.

The more Dread Don thought of the deception the higher raged the storm of passion.

"Why not confront them with the life!" he exclaimed. "I'd like to throw it back into their teeth—the infamous hounds. I will!"

The next moment he had thrown open the door and was striding toward Paradise Phil's.

His men were there with the exception of the mountain cemetery, and Wildcat Lige on his way to Frisco to prevent the payment of the order in the triangular buckskin bag taken from the person of Mica Marle.

The short walk gave the boss of Red Blade a chance to cool down, but he did not improve it, and he reached the saloon in greater rage than ever.

There was fire in his eye when he threw his splendid figure across the threshold and he advanced toward three men standing at the counter.

"Any new trails, cap'n?" was the greeting of one member of the little group.

"I have found one."

"By Jove! we will follow it if it leads ter ther coast. Is it the trail ov Montez?"

"It is the trail of three liars!"

The startled men drew back a step and stared into the tensely drawn face of Dread Don. He

leaned forward as he spoke as if to hurl his words with double force into the faces of the trio.

"No crawlin' back!" he went on, glaring at the Clan. "I have traced the falsehood down. Dora, or Perdita as she calls herself, is not at the bottom of the false shaft. I have been there!"

What could the accused say?

"You might as well tell me the truth," Dread Don went on. "I will get at it elsewhere if not here. Go on—the solid truth, now."

The men exchanged glances that caught the vigilant eye of the Red Blade boss.

"It warn't our fault cap'n by ther holy spoons it warn't," said one at last. "We took her thar. It war Mica's intention ter choke her on ther brink ov ther false shaft and then to let her tumble headlong to ther bottom. We got her to ther shanty, we uncovered ther pit an' Mica told her that she war ter suffer death at ther hands of ther Cool Clan. Did she flinch? Not an inch, cap'n! All at once, an' just as Mica Marle was putting out his hand ter grip her throat, she turned, broke from Chinquapin's grip an' disappeared! It war like a flash, an' for three minutes we stood like fools thar lookin' inter each other's faces."

"But the report—the lie!—get to that," growled Dread Don.

"We thought the woman dead," the rough went on; "but as she had not perished in accordance with your orders, captain, we agreed ter report that ther sentence had been carried out in full."

"And Mica was coming to me with that report?"

"Yes."

"Then he didn't get the bowie a moment too soon!" flashed the captain of the Clan. "Nobody followed Perdita down the shaft?"

"No."

"It was easier to lie!" cried Dread Don. "I did not enlist you for this. There are old timbers enough in that shaft to break the fall of a body. You knew thet."

"But we did not think of it at the time."

The reply was the proud curl of a lip and the flash of an eye.

"I want no liars with me!" said Dread Don. "I shall try a new deal."

"The three men could not conceal their consternation."

"The present Clan is dismissed!" the Red Blade tough went on. "I shall muster a new one if I need it. Talk to me about keeping an oath! A man who will lie to his leader won't respect a vow. Remember that while I am still Dread Don, I am no longer your captain. The old Clan is dead."

The man drew back and glanced over the room taking in all the little wooden tables where card games were going on.

Seeing a certain man on whom his eyes quickly rested he turned from the astonished trio at the counter and crossed the room.

Reaching out one hand he touched the man and motioned him up with a look.

The dismissed men scowled.

"Is that ther timber out o' which he makes ther new Clan?" hissed one.

"It looks thet way, but not while I'm hyer shall Mountain Burke head the new band an' touch the divvy thet belongs to us. I'll throw up on ther whole game first. We'll sell out ter Deadwood."

"Ter ther highest bidder!" said the other two.

Meantime Dread Don and the man he had touched were walking from the ranch. There was victory and revenge mingled in the captain's face, and he showed it in a glance sent over his shoulder at the three roughs at the counter.

"Ther new deal shall tumble ter pieces," said one. "Thet's ther way a king does when he gets tired ov his cabinet. We've been dismissed an' at ther door ov ther bonanza—dismissed for one little lie! The new game shall never win!"

Ten minutes later in one of the cabins of Red Blade sat three men at a rough table upon which was a lamp which showed their bronzed faces.

The door was tightly shut, and they talked in low but determined tones when they spoke at all.

"Shall it be a sell-out from ther first?" asked one.

"I say yes! What's ther use ov tryin' ter play ther game out hyer alone? Ther old Clan is dead, Don says; ther new one is formin' now. Ther king ov Red Blade makes his new cabinet ter-night, an' ef we growl hyer he will play one of his sudden hands thet'll send us to ther pards on ther mountain. I say, bargain with Deadwood."

"Or Custer?"

"With Deadwood first," was the answer. "We kin name our price thar an' get it. If the woman is alive, an' Montez, too, Dread Don will have his hands full with them. Let Deadwood swoop down here some night, an' ther mine will be ours still."

The proposition took, and the dismissed pards completed the arrangements in still lower tones,

which could not reach the ears of any person who might be at the door.

In the light of the little lamp, ere they left the cabin, they joined hands and swore to stand together in the new play. Giants cast in bronze they were, men who had carried their hearts on their sleeves for years at the beck and call of Dread Don of Red Blade.

Spurned, cast off, now they wanted vengeance, and they were not the men to stand by and see strange hands reap the fruits of their labor.

No! Dread Don should know that he had insulted the wrong men, and the big bonanza should not fall into alien hands after all.

Treason was afoot in Red Blade.

That night and shortly before the conference of the trio broke up in the cabin, four men slipped out after the other from Dread Don's shanty.

Among them was the bonanza boss himself, and when they stood together a little group in the moonlight, they seemed men of more than the usual stature.

"Remember!" said Dread Don to his companions. "The old Clan is the enemy if it makes a suspicious move. It may soon be Red Blade and Red Blade, and if it comes to that there must be swift work. Deadwood and Custer must not step in now. The bonanza is under us and its secret is known by but few. If the woman comes back throw her into my clutches or canonize her with the bowie. If Montez comes, shoot him on sight. If Full Hand Frank or Reptile Ralph turns up, give them the trigger."

"What of the colonel?" asked one of the group.

Dread Don laughed.

"Give the fool five minutes to leave camp," he said.

The four men parted, and a little while later the members of the old Clan came from the cabin where they had held their conference.

"Play it deep, Morg; play ther game for all thar is in it," said one in cool tones. "Make ther bargain bindin' an' strike ther right men. Make ther oath stronger than steel."

"Trust me for all that," was the answer. "I'll be back hyer to-morrow with a report that'll do yer good. Red Blade ag'in' Red Blade it is, though I never thought it would come ter thet. It is Clan ag'in' Clan. I'll play it finer than a fairy's hair. Dismissed! kicked out o' ther ring! Jehu! won't somebody curse ther three outlawed galoots?"

Mountain Morg, the speaker, shook his drooping mustache with a laugh that had a vengeful ring.

"I'm off—off for Deadwood!" he said, with sudden seriousness. "Watch Don an' his new Clan till I come back."

The next moment he had turned his back on his two pards and was walking toward the Deadwood trail.

"Things are gettin' interestin'," he exclaimed. "I'll make a bargain in Deadwood that'll stand through thick an' thin. Before ther week's out I'll have hyer on this ground, an' at ther door ov ther big bonanza, ther best pistols an' ther best men in Dakota. An' our percentage will make us bonanza kings after all."

He struck the Deadwood road at the northern confines of Red Blade, and started off in a rapid gait.

"They think ther new Clan ther boss, but they must not forget ther old!" laughed Mountain Morg.

Half a mile down the mountain road a voice rung out on the night air:

"Halt, thar!"

Mountain Morg stopped instantly and threw one hand to a revolver in his belt.

"Doing the sell-out game already, eh?" continued the same voice, and a man stepped into the trail a few yards away. "Its Clan against Clan, I see. Mountain Morgan, your trail ends here."

The last word was lost in the report of a revolver, and Mountain Morgan threw up both hands and fell.

"That is one!" said the shooter.

It was Dread Don.

CHAPTER XXVII.

A TIGRESS IN AMBUSH.

AWAITING the result of Mountain Morg's mission to Deadwood, the two pards who with him had been so suddenly dismissed from partnership with Dread Don remained quietly in Red Blade.

The night passed, and the new day was drawing to its close. Mountain Morgan had not come back.

Two men watched the Deadwood road with eager and anxious eyes. What kept the man?

Toward sundown a dilapidated cart drawn by a horse in the same stage of decay came into Red Blade.

The owner and driver was a lank individual, whose age could not be guessed. He was a disappointed prospector, and the bottom of his cart was covered with picks and other mining implements.

But in that same cart lay the stiffened body of a man, and when somebody looked upon it when the cart had been halted in front of the Full Deck, he uttered a cry of recognition:

"Mountain Morg!"

There came to the cart among other men two mountain athletes, who approached side by side as if controlled by mutual curiosity.

They looked over the wheel together, saw the dead man and then touched hands as if by accident.

Neither spoke until both stood face to face in a little cabin a few steps away.

"Well, somebody got him!" said one, and he said it through clinched teeth.

"He never got ter Deadwood."

For a moment amid profound silence the men looked into each other's eyes.

"Thar war three ov us twenty-four hours ago: Mountain Morg, Oregon Oscar an' Jim Dandy. One ov the three lies over yonder in a prospector's cart. The bargain must be made by the living. Let us throw for the trip. Hyer goes, Oregon," and the speaker took a ten-dollar gold piece from his pocket and balanced it on his bronzed finger. "Heads you go, Oregon; tails, I make the trip."

"Throw her up."

The gold piece was thrown dextrously to the rafters overhead and came back to the rough table with a musical ring.

The two men bent forward to note the result.

"Heads!" said one. "I take Morg's place."

"In the cart?" laughed his pard.

"By the Fates, no!" was the quick retort.

"He failed; I will not. I will take the mountain path, not the stage road. I will not fail, Dandy," and the clinched hand of the speaker dropped upon the table with a force that almost overturned it.

By and by the two men stole back to the square and found the cart still there while the prospector was refreshing himself at Keno Keifer's bar.

He readily told the story of the finding of the body, how his horse shied at two heavy boots among the bushes along the roadside, and how, when he looked, he saw a dead man there with a bullet hole in his forehead.

His story told the two pards that Mountain Morg had never got to Deadwood, and that the bonanza secret was still unsold.

"Good-by," said Oregon Oscar, to his companion. "I'll take the secret thar an' inaugurate a new state of affairs in Red Blade."

A minute later the second messenger was gone and Jim Dandy was the only one of the three left.

Paradise Phil's had no charm for him that night. He loafed about the Full Deck while the corpse of Mountain Morg lay in his own cabin, and at last went to his own retreat.

If one had listened at the shanty door an hour later he would have heard the heavy breathings of a sleeping man for Jim Dandy was oblivious to everything.

It was nearing on midnight when a man came down the main street of Red Blade with the strangest of objects in his hand. He approached Jim Dandy's cabin and stopped at the door. Reaching up he tried the latch, pressed it down a little and pushed on the door.

Finding that it yielded without noise he did not listen when he had opened it but threw inside the object he carried in his right hand.

If he had thrown it at the sleeper on the inside his aim could have been no truer than it was for it struck Jim Dandy in the face and he awoke in the twinkling of an eye.

The man who had opened the door was already gone; he was walking away with a smile at his lips, while the inmate of the cabin was looking at the object which had struck him.

This was nothing less than a human hand, lately amputated and still bleeding, and clutched by the fingers was a piece of paper, which Jim Dandy read, while the man who had delivered the message was walking coolly off.

"To JIM DANDY (the last of three fools)," he read:

"You are hereby given five minutes in which to leave Red Blade. If you are here at the end of that time, you will be shot on sight. The hand of the second fool delivers this message. Mountain Morg came back in state, but unfit for service. Five minutes! Remember!"

A signature was not needed to tell the man who read, that the message taken from the dead hand meant business. He knew it as certainly as though the author had appended his name. He looked up suddenly, as if he expected to see the enemy at the door, but the portal was shut, and he saw no one.

"I'll go," he said, crushing the paper ere he threw it down. "I'm not one ov those galoots who laughs at death when he's got the upper hand. Five minutes, eh? I'll look in on Dread Don as I pass his shanty, an' ere I say good-by, I'll contrive ter tell him that mebbe thar'll be a side game played that'll rake in the stakes."

Jim Dandy left the cabin and went away, watched, though he knew it not, by two men, who did not lose sight of him.

He glanced into Paradise Phil's place as he went by, and muttered something half-aloud. He walked straight to Dread Don's shanty, and struck the door with his fist.

"Come in," said a voice on the inside.

Jim Dandy opened the door and walked in. As he crossed the threshold he heard a slight ex-

clamation of astonishment, and beheld a woman at the table.

"Not the tiger, but one of his pards!" she said, and then added, with a smile, "I thought you were Dread Don."

Jim Dandy could not speak for a moment. He saw before him a woman, whose glowing black eyes added much to her striking beauty. She faced him, with her faultless figure drawn to its true height, and with a silver-mounted revolver at the end of her arm.

"I know you," said the man at last. "You leaped into the false shaft when Mica Marle was reaching for your throat. You are Perdita."

The woman's eyes said "yes" before her lips moved.

"And you are one of the Cool Clan," she said.

"Not this moment," said Jim Dandy. "I'm one o' ther dismissed. Thar's a new deal."

"A new Clan?" asked the woman.

"A spanker new lay-out. I'm one o' the shelved gentry, Jim Dandy, at your service; ther last man ov ther old Clan save Jasper James, the last recruit, an' Wildcat Lige, who has gone ter Frisco on a mission."

"Of what nature?"

"Hang me, if I know exactly, but it's something about a new bonanza."

Perdita smiled.

"Always a bonanza of some kind," she said.

"That's what we're hyer for," grinned Jim Dandy.

"But Dread Don?—where is he?"

"I don't know."

"In camp?"

"I think so."

"Who are the new Clan?"

"Silent Silas, Topeka Tom, Red Jasper."

"And Dread Don?"

"An' the captain."

"If you belong to the old Clan, what brought you here, Jim Dandy?"

The man hesitated, but said with a smile a moment later:

"I'm goin' away. Circumstances force me from Red Blade, but by Jehosaphat! I'm liable ter come back!"

"Oho! you have turned against the captain," laughed Perdita.

"You may bet your beauty on that."

"Then you need not come back. I am here."

"I see that, but you war hyer before, an' they caught you," said the tough. "You broke a knife against Dread Don's bosom, and found the false shaft. I say plainly that a woman can't win in a game against Don."

"You think so?"

"I know it! You may tell me that the man called Montez is your pard; you want more than one."

"Which means, does it not, that you are at my service?"

"Did I say so?"

"No, but—"

"Wal, I am—thar!" said the Red Blade tough. "I know more about Dread Don than anybody in Red Blade. I have followed his fortunes since— What do you look at me in that way for?"

Perdita had leaned forward suddenly, and while she regarded Jim Dandy with startling interest, she was holding her breath, waiting for the end of the sentence.

"Go on! Since when?" she said.

"Since the summer of 'Sixty-nine," finished the man.

Perdita straightened, and drew a long breath of relief.

"Ain't I eligible?" smiled Jim Dandy.

"I don't want you."

"Why not?"

"I don't want you!" was repeated, with additional firmness. "You have been Dread Don's pard—that is enough for me to know. I hate them all!"

"Thar's not many ov ther old crowd left. I can count them on my fingers."

"When the game has been played out, you can count them on one," said the tigress.

"Not if Dread Don plays one ov his lightning hand. They are marvels ov destruction; they come when you don't look for them. I've seen 'em fall like thunderbolts from a clear sky. Ar' you goin' ter remain hyer till he comes?"

"Perhaps."

"An' then—"

"Then," said Perdita, leaning forward and speaking solemnly—"then, in the name of the past, I am going to finish the game at one fell swoop!"

"You ar'? Thet's bizness. At one fell swoop, eh?" chuckled Jim Dandy. "I'd like ter stay ter see ther play, but really I can't. Be careful thet you make no mistake, Perdita. Thar must be no second play on Dread Don. If you don't kill at once, thar'll be another seraph over ther river. Make thet fell swoop tell for all thar is in it. My best wishes ar' with you. Let me say thet under the arms thar is no steel plate. Warn't it Achilles or some other big feller who war vulnerable only in his heel? Under Dread Don's arms thar is no steel. You broke a dagger on him, and you know."

"That will never occur again!" answered Perdita, with a smile.

"Good-night," said Jim Dandy, drawing back.

"Good-night."

The Red Blade tough lingered at the door and stared at the woman, whose dark beauty with her flashing eyes was so striking.

"What are you looking at?" she asked.

"At them eyes. By Jupiter! they beat all the eyes I ever saw. Whar did you catch the tigress thet gave 'em to you?"

Perdita threw her head back and laughed; and while the silvery tones echoed in the little cabin, the door opened and shut, and Jim Dandy was gone.

"If it warn't for one thing I'd warn Don," he said. "I believe he killed Oregon Oscar."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE POINT OF A DAGGER.

WHILE Perdita is waiting for the loss of Red Blade, and that in his own shanty, let us go back to another character of our mountain romance, and a person in whom the reader may have taken some interest.

We left Ruby in Custer confronted before the principal hotel by Colonel Snowdrop who, with her wrist in his grasp, as in a vise, had declared that she should go with him to Frisco.

What could the girl do?

Some of the late events of her life seemed the events of a dream; her capture by Dread Don in Red Blade, the imprisonment in the depths of the bonanza, the rescue by Montez and Full Hand Frank, and the unexpected coming to Custer.

Ruby had no friends there; she could seek help from the rough class of people who inhabited Deadwood's rival, but would they listen to her as against the colonel? She doubted it.

"Yes, my bird, to Frisco," continued Shasta Leon, as he had called himself. "I'll give you golden plumage thar, an' show you off in gorgeous style. No backing out now. Thar's wealth in Frisco for the asking. We set out for Sidney right away."

The girl's eyes flashed at these words, and the colonel laughed.

"The first time I saw you, I said to myself, 'Thar's my new bonanza queen,' ha, ha! I've got the new fortune right here, Ruby," and Snowdrop put his hand on his left breast. "Go an' throw yourself before Custer, if you want, but I've got the winning hand in the game just now."

Twenty minutes later, the four-horse stage that lumbered out of Custer City, carried but two passengers, a broad-shouldered man whose eyes were full of triumph, and a young girl who watched him as the dove watches the hawk that has caught it.

"I'll give you a pointer that'll show you that I'm not going to Frisco on a fool's errand," suddenly said Colonel Snowdrop, leaning toward the girl, who sat opposite him in the jolting stage.

As he spoke, he ran one hand beneath his coat and produced a dark-colored buckskin bag, triangular in shape, and not quite as large as his hand.

Ruby let slip a little exclamation of astonishment when she saw it.

"The bonanza is in this bag," continued Snowdrop. "It is easier obtained than the big one they're fighting for up at Red Blade. I have but to throw this upon the counter of a certain bank in Frisco to have a cool three hundred thousand counted out to yours truly, Erastus Snowdrop. Aha! do you recognize the buckskin treasury?"

"No," said Ruby. "I see it for the first time in my life, but my astonishment is to see it in your hands."

The big adventurer smiled, and held the little amulet up in the moonlight and looked at it several moments with eyes beaming with satisfaction.

"Thought I hadn't it, eh?" he exclaimed; "thought it war buried with Mica Marle *alias* Reginald Ralfe on the mountain side?"

"No. I knew it was not found on the body after death, but—"

"But you didn't think that it had tumbled into my possession?"

"That is true. I thought some one else had it."

"The person who killed Mica?"

Ruby gave the speaker a strange look which was much of an accusation.

"What! didn't you do it?" she asked almost unconsciously.

"Well hardly, my mountain dove," laughed the colonel, "but I'm the chap that profited most by Mica's sudden taking off. You see, the bowie that did him up, cut the string that kept his amulet at a certain place on his breast, and caused it to drop to his waist whar I found it while Dread Don's right-bower war lyin' dead in the moonshine. Thar isn't a man in Red Blade that believes that I have the amulet, as you see it now."

"If you did not kill Mica Marle then in Heaven's name who did?" exclaimed the startled girl.

"Couldn't you guess?" asked the colonel.

"He may have had a dozen enemies for aught

I know, and as many men may have known of the existence and the worth of his amulet."

"But a dozen men did not know," said the colonel quickly. "When you first saw this buckskin treasury, you believed you had discovered the man who finished the lieutenant of the Cool Clan."

"How could I think otherwise?" smiled the girl.

"Thar's something in that," was the reply.

"You have not opened it?"

"It has been inspected and carefully sewn up."

"Well?"

"It is worth just what I've said it was—a cool three hundred thousand."

"At any bank?"

"No, at a certain one named inside."

"What if you have been followed, or what if Dread Don has sent some one ahead to prevent the payment of the order?"

Colonel Snowdrop started violently, and fastened his eyes on his beautiful passenger.

"Do you think he has done this?" he flashed, clutching her arm as he leaned forward, while with the other he quickly hid the amulet under his coat. "They don't know that I have it. I went to Deadwood first, then I concluded to take the Union Pacific. I stole back through Red Blade without detection. I am absolutely safe. Dread Don can have put no one on my track."

The girl made no reply, but settled back in the little forward corner she occupied and kept silence.

"By George! she knows something," muttered the colonel while he watched her. "She would not have suggested that somebody might be on my track if she did not."

The stage continued to rumble on down the mountain road between Custer City and Sidney, and now and then the bright moonlight showed Ruby in her corner wide-awake and with an animated look.

"Who has left Red Blade for Frisco?" he suddenly asked, shifting himself to that side of the vehicle occupied by the girl. "If you have a secret of this kind, I want to know it."

Ruby looked up half-defiantly.

"Did I say any one has gone?" she said.

"Not exactly, but by Jupiter! the mere suggestion is enough. Do they know that I have the amulet?"

"I cannot say."

"But Dread Don has a man after me, eh?"

"Perhaps ahead of you."

Colonel Snowdrop uttered a wild exclamation, and the girl seemed to enjoy his alarm.

"I think I have said enough," she went on, drawing away from him. "If there is a man ahead, you will find him in Frisco when you get there. Be patient."

But Colonel Snowdrop was the last man to show patience under such circumstances. He fairly chafed under the girl's words, and at last with an oath, darted at her like a rattlesnake when it leaps forward to strike.

"You have gone just far enough to make me want the rest," he exclaimed. "They have sent somebody ahead to intercept me in Frisco, have they? When did the man go, and who is he?"

"What will you give for the information, Colonel Snowdrop?"

The man from Jordan Valley tightened his grip on the arm he held.

"You're in no position to bargain!" he laughed in Ruby's face. "You are going to Frisco to be the bonanza queen I'm going to make you when I get there. What will I give you for what you know? Nothing! But, by the eternal heavens, girl, if you don't tell me all I'll leave you behind and find another partner when I strike the city. You understand me now."

"Find the new partner then," laughed Ruby exhibiting a fearlessness that brightened her eyes.

"You won't tell?"

"Why should I when you will find the man when you get to Frisco?"

"But I'd rather go thar prepared for the Red Blader," was the reply. "An' that's just how this holder of the big hand proposes to go. You think I won't leave you behind after my boasts in Custer. Don't fool yourself thar, my Black Hills princess. You came to this country for vengeance. Do you want to leave the game before it has been half played out? We are alone here. I have my hands within reach of the whitest throat in all this region. Colonel Snowdrop is only a romantic covering for a Jordan Valley tiger. I had to shoot one man the first night I was in Red Blade. You don't want to play with Shasta Leon, girl. See! here is the best hand in Dakota to-night. Now it is at your throat!"

At that moment the girl drew back and the hand that darted serpent-like at her stretch of white throat missed its mark.

"Thar's no escape!" laughed the suddenly angered colonel.

"I have you in a rattling cage, my blue-eyed secret-keeper."

Ruby sprung up and uttered a cry of alarm. "Stand off!" she exclaimed. "I have not set out upon this journey helpless. I want to

shed the blood of no man whom I am not sworn against. But you may carry your coercion too far, Shasta Leon of Jordan Valley."

Instead of drawing back, the bonanza-seeker glared at the girl from the middle of the stage while his hands were ready for a forward leap.

Just then the stage gave a sudden lurch to the right and Ruby was thrown violently against the side. She uttered a slight cry of fear as if she was threatened with sudden injury.

It was Colonel Snowdrop's moment, and he saw it.

Quick as thought almost he sprung at the girl before she could recover, and the next second she was in his hands.

"No cry to the galoot overhead," he said sternly. "I only want to know who has gone ahead of us to Frisco."

Ruby drew back as far as she could and gave him a look of defiance.

"Won't tell, eh?" came from between clinched teeth. "I'll leave you behind this stage dead as Mica Marle. Don't be a fool, girl."

In reply Ruby threw up her disengaged arm, and to the colonel's surprise the hand held a small, thin-bladed dagger.

"I swore to use this on the tiger of tigers, Dread Don of Red Blade!" she said, glancing up at the weapon. "Unclutch me, Shasta Leon, or by the soul of my murdered mother! I will use it on you!"

The cool ferocity of the girl's words made the big desperado halt. He saw the flashing of the eyes just below the uplifted blade, and dropping the arm, drew back.

"I don't want it carried that far now!" he muttered. "She inherits the courage of her mother, and Dread Don knew what he was doing when he said that her dark-blue eyes were dangerous, and had to be corraled. Wait till I get her to Frisco. I'll find the man who has been hurled ahead, and I'll cash the order in the buckskin bag if I have to shoot my way to the cashier's desk! Settle down and cool off, my seraph with the dagger."

To the girl he said nothing calculated to bring down the uplifted dagger just at that moment; he laughed as if he was not afraid of its point; and the stage kept on with two silent passengers, one of whom occupied a corner with a gleam of victory in her dark-blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

PERDITA sat quietly, but not altogether patiently, in Dread Don's cabin in Red Blade.

Jim Dandy, the outlawed member of the old Clan, had said good-night and taken his departure. The strange message he had received by the dead hand which had been thrown into his shanty, was enough to frighten a cool man from the camp.

He threw several fierce oaths over his shoulders as he tramped from Red Blade, and wondered how the woman would get along with Dread Don when he came.

Don himself was at that moment deep in the depths of the bonanza. His eyes had a brighter gleam than they had held for many hours, and he swung his lantern hither and thither about the underground rooms he inspected.

The boss of Red Blade had made a discovery which was somewhat startling. Ruby Ryan was gone, and he was searching the caverns for his blue-eyed enemy.

"The next time it will not be incarceration alive," came over his lips in mad accents. "I was a fool for leaving the bird alive in the cage before. I knew she was Julia's child the moment I set eyes on her, and not the seraph Colonel Snowdrop wanted to make out. Gone she is, and forever, mebbe, for since she knows that Red Blade is a dangerous place for her, she will not venture to play her fool game out."

Dread Don stopped suddenly, as if a stern halt had struck his ears.

"Just keep your hands where they are, Don," said a voice, and the desperado of Red Blade saw in the light of his own lantern two men whose hands held revolvers.

One of them he knew, the other wore a mask which, reaching from forehead to chin, hid the contour and expression of the face.

"So you were not riddled by the bullets we dropped into the false shaft?" grated Dread Don, eying the man who was not masked.

"Does it look like I was?" was the question, couched in a smile.

"The hole in the side of the shaft saved you, Montez."

"Perhaps."

"That man plays some game that makes him a coward!" exclaimed Dread Don, covering the masked man with his hand. "He dare not show his face. Ah! is it your tigress pard in male attire, Montez?"

The New Mexican laughed.

"Do you think she masquerades again as Jumpin' Jim of Rattlesnake Ranch?" he said. "In that disguise she broke a dagger against your breast, I know. That person is not Perdita."

"Let him discard his mask then."

"He may not wish to."

"Then let the coward keep it on!"

This sentence came with a biting sneer from Dread Don's lips, and he looked once more at Montez.

The resemblance between the New Mexican and Dread Don was actually striking. They were counterparts in physique, and in face were not very dissimilar.

Dread Don in Don's garments and he would deceive some of Red Blade's citizens.

"Gentlemen, you have the drop on me and in the depths beneath Red Blade," continued Dread Don.

"In the bonanza, eh?" laughed Montez.

"So you say."

"So we know!" was the quick assurance.

"Dread Don, this is the old mine found by Sherwood and his party; this is the bonanza whose secret has cost more than one life. Let me tell you what you should know by this time. The woman who for years was the mad Bonanza Queen of Santa Fe has regained her reason. I am the man who has watched her all the time. She is Sherwood's daughter, the sister of Julia, whose hand was pierced once by a bowie-knife, thrown at your command by Mica Marle. I am merely Montez to many men, but I have another name, which it is not necessary to repeat here. You have discovered, we know, that the girl Edith, called Ruby Ryan in Red Blade, is not where you left her a few hours ago. She has been taken forcibly from the game."

"Killed?" exclaimed Dread Don.

"No; she has merely gone to Custer, there to remain till we have played the game out. I sent her down awhile ago in Custer Dick's stage."

Dread Don ground his teeth and looked fiercely at Montez.

"Why don't you face me with this pard of yours?" he exclaimed. "Bring Perdita hyer?"

"That is just what is going to be done," was the answer.

"When?"

"As soon as she is to be found."

"The quicker the better!" flashed the boss of Red Blade. "The game at present seems to be yours, Montez. You first found Mica Marle and gave him your bowie?"

Montez's eyes were seen to blaze.

"I did!" he said, and then covering Dread Don with the hand that did not hold any revolver, he went on: "I confess here that this hand drove the bowie between the shoulders of your masked right-bower."

"Masked?"

"He was the true Reginald Ralfe, whose Christmas day crime at Lizard Lay-out exiled him from all mankind. If I had time to tell a certain story you would know that I had a right to slay that wretch."

"And you robbed him?"

"Of his buckskin amulet?"

"Yes."

"I took nothing but his life," said Montez, proudly.

Dread Don showed his surprise in a manner that made the New Mexican smile faintly.

"In Satan's name, who took it then?" cried the Red Blade boss.

"I cannot say."

"Was it that man?" said Dread Don flashing a look at Montez's companion.

"He never touched it. I answer for him."

"It is a mystery, one of Red Blade's new puzzles. Let it be solved hereafter. They say that whoever has the amulet can have it cashed for three hundred thousand in Frisco."

"Yes."

"But he never will!" cried the Red Blader. "He will have a cool devil step between him and the cashier's desk at the last moment, and if the check is presented it will be pinned to the counter by a bowie. Now!" suddenly finished the speaker, "now, bring the woman here!"

"Give me hat and coat, Dread Don."

"Mine?" exclaimed the captain of the roughs stepping back.

"Yours. The sooner you comply the sooner you will see Perdita."

"When she comes—what?"

"You ought to know without asking."

Dread Don put down his lantern and threw off his coat which he cast forward with a gesture of bad humor.

"My hat, too?"

"Your hat," said Montez, with a smile.

The next moment the gray sombrero had followed the coat and the boss of the gold bonanza camp saw Montez coolly don the two articles.

"That man would pass for me after night. I never thought of that before," muttered Dread Don looking at Montez in his new disguise. "He is going up among the new Clan. He has a scheme of some kind afoot."

At that moment Montez stepped forward with a stout cord which he had taken from the jacket he had just discarded.

"Is that for me?" asked Dread Don glaring madly at the cord.

"For your hands till Perdita comes," was the reply.

Montez looked sharply at his companion when he went forward and the captain of the Clan saw the revolver drop an inch lower and cover his heart.

"I sha'n't hasten matters," he said with a meaning smile as Montez slipped over his hands the little noose at one end of the cord. "I ask but this; that these hands shall be free when Perdita comes."

"I promise that."

Without more ado the hands of the desperado sport were suddenly brought together on his back and quickly bound there. Montez stepped back.

"You know what to do," he said in significant tones to the man in the mask. "If there should be a step behind you without the signal, turn and kill the maker. If Dread Don threatens trouble wing him for the avenger."

That was all; the masked man nodded and Montez withdrew.

He looked like Dread Don as he went down the corridor of the big bonanza and left the Red Blade boss and the mask face to face.

"Does he know where to find the woman?" asked Dread Don almost before the figure of the New Mexican had disappeared.

"I don't know."

It was the first time the masked man had spoken and the three words were couched in a tone that took the desperado forward.

"Whar did he leave her?" he asked.

But this time the man before him was not to be caught. He merely shook his head and showed Dread Don a pair of shrewd eyes behind the mask.

"He won't try his voice again," muttered the big Red Blader. "He sees that I almost got a grip on it before, and now he puts a check-rein on his tongue. I'll catch him yet before Perdita comes."

Meanwhile Montez was threading the underground passages of the bonanza. He went like a man who knew whither he was going and at last he reached a ladder that seemed to lead up a shaft.

"Almost thar!" he exclaimed when near the top of the ladder.

At that instant in a certain cabin in Red Blade a woman with shoe-black eyes sprung back from a table as if a serpent had been thrown upon it by some one.

"My God! is he coming up from the depths of the bonanza?" she exclaimed, looking down at a certain place in the floor which she soon covered with a revolver. "I thought he would enter by the door, but whichever way he comes is doom!"

It was a strange tableau that the eager, breathless woman made in the light of the lamp.

She looked more the avenger than ever before, and her eyes seemed to change to a serpent's while she watched the boards which were now moving, showing that some one was underneath.

The seconds went by, with the motionless woman ready to fire at the first head that should be poked above the floor.

Perdita seemed a statue of keen expectancy.

At last one board was pushed aside, and the next moment she caught sight of a gray sombrero, broad of brim, with two handsome eyes under it.

The sight seemed to imbue her with life. Everywhere among the Black Hills was known the sombrero of the Cool Clan captain.

Perdita started forward, and thrust the cocked revolver into the very face of the man under the hat.

"I have waited years for this moment!" she exclaimed. "It is the hand of a sister, not mine, that presses this trigger. Now, Dread Don, I play the red game out!"

Then came a flash that seemed to ignite the brim of the sombrero, and the cabin was filled with the pistol's report.

In an instant the head disappeared and the board fell back.

Perdita drew back with a look of triumph.

"They said when I left Santa Fe that I would never reach the end of this trail!" she cried. "They did not know! He came up from the mine for which he played with the desperateness of a tiger; he has gone back—dead! Oh, Heaven! witness that Dora Sherwood, called Perdita, has avenged the dead!"

She threw herself upon a rough stool, and buried her face in her arms on the table.

For ten minutes she remained in this attitude, not a sound escaping her lips. Was she recalling the wild past, whose deeds had thrown her upon the trail of vengeance?

All at once the woman sprung up, and stooped over the floor. Her strength was sufficient to remove the boards, and taking the lamp from the table, she held it down the opening.

"He is there at the end of the trail," she said, gazing at the burly figure that lay at the foot of the ladder. "It was the revolver for you at last, Dread Don. This is the vengeance of Heaven by Tom Sherwood's child!"

Two minutes later she was going down to the man, with the lamp in one hand, as if impelled by a curiosity she could not master.

She got to the foot of the ladder at last, and with a smile of victory at the corners of her finely-chiseled lips, she bent over her victim.

The man was lying partly on his face with his

long black hair framing it in somberness, and she put her hand down to brush it away.

The next moment she looked like a person smitten with horror, and then a wild cry parted her lips:

"My God! Montez!"

CHAPTER XXX.

PERDITA'S MAN-HUNT.

Is it a wonder that after that thrilling cry, Perdita stood spell-bound over the man who lay at her feet?

It was Montez and not Dread Don, Montez her pard, her main stay in her game of vengeance and death!

Once more she held down the lamp so that its light would fall upon the powder-blackened face of the New Mexican, then she started back and went up the ladder without a word.

Montez lay alone in the darkness and Perdita set her teeth hard when she thought of him. The gray sombrero and the laced collar of the coat had deceived her; she had taken Montez for Dread Don, that was all there was of it.

"I have killed the best friend I ever had and all because he came to me with the devil's livery on," she said, when she had reached the little cabin. "I feel that I want blood for that mistake. Montez is dead!—Montez, the man who stood by me during my mad life in Santa Fe, Montez the man who told me where my enemy was when I was myself again. Heaven pity me! Now, vengeance, show me Dread Don and his gang!"

Five minutes later the cabin was deserted for the tigress from the south had taken her departure.

"Where did Montez get Dread Don's hat and coat, and why was he wearing them?" the woman asked herself among the cabins of Red Blade. "Did he find the captain and kill him? If he did knowing my oath he got his deserts after all. Now where is the tiger whose life I want?"

"Mebbe I kin show yer," said a voice, that made Perdita turn.

"You," she said, starting forward and staring into the face of the little square-built man who confronted her. "Who are you?"

"A galoot who is in tolerable bad odor in Red Blade just at this writing," was the reply accompanied by a grin which Perdita plainly saw. "I am Reptile Ralph."

Perdita uttered a slight exclamation at mention of the name as if she had heard it before.

"Mebbe I kin show yer Dread Don if that's ther saint ye'r lookin' for," the little man went on.

"I want him!"

"Ye'r ther woman what came hyer with Montez, ain't yer?"

"I am Perdita."

"Dread Don don't call yer by that name."

"No." And the woman's lips quivered behind the little word.

"It makes little difference by what name I am known. I am here for a purpose, and just now that purpose is to find Dread Don."

"Foller me, then. I've got ter steer clear ov a few breakers in this camp just now but if they find me, whoopee! thar'll be fun in Red Blade. They swore an oath when they planted Slim Ivan—ther whole camp did."

"Who was Slim Ivan?" asked Perdita.

"Don't yer know?" exclaimed Reptile Ralph, showing some astonishment. "Why, ther man with ther tissue lungs; ther galoot I laid out at Paradise Phil's for a remark agin' me. Oh, I'm a cyclone from Storm Center when they rile me, a rip-snorter from Buzz Saw Bar."

Reptile Ralph was conducting Perdita down the main street of Red Blade, and toward the main attraction of the bonanza camp Paradise Phil's saloon. It was there that he expected to show her the man he wanted, and whenever he looked into her eyes he saw that she would start a storm the moment she saw the captain of the Clan.

The door of the place was nearly closed for once, but beyond the narrow opening was seen the figure of a number of men.

"In there?" asked Perdita glancing at her companion.

"I'd bet a good deal on it," was the reply. "If I wanted ter find Dread Don on an occasion ov this kind I'd calkerlate ter meet 'im beyond this threshold. Ef you meet him, what?"

"I am going to rid Red Blade of him forever!"

"Je-osh! I thought so from yer eyes!" ejaculated Reptile Ralph. "Ef you do that in thar, ther Clan may turn on yer."

"It is a new deal; the old Clan has passed away—"

"I know that," was the interruption. "I got onter that awhile ago."

"What about the new men?" asked the woman. "You know them all; they have been chosen from among the citizens of Red Blade."

"Know 'em? I should say I do. Ther new Clan is a slight improvement on ther old in my opinion."

"In what way?"

"In weakness."

Perdita started and smiled.

"Maybe you underestimate them because

you don't like them," she said. "Dread Don would not select men on whom he could not depend."

"I know ther whole kit," said Reptile Ralph. "Mountain Morg an' his set had ther grit ter lie ter Don; ther new Clan has no blood for thet. Go in thar, an' try ther mettle ov ther crowd. It may fight, an' if it does 'twill be on ther spur ov ther moment while it's blood is hot. But if you drop Dread Don do it at once. Red Blade is ther worst place on top o' ground ter make bad plays in. Thar's ther lay-out."

Reptile Ralph waved his hand toward the door of Paradise Phil's den and stepped back. Perdita looked beyond the door slightly ajar and gripping her revolver anew went forward.

"Let the last play be made here and now," she said to herself as her foot struck the well-worn sill.

A moment later the avenger from the south had crossed the threshold from which there could be no retreat unobserved. She advanced into the den, and in a second stood face to face with more than twenty men.

"Dread Don's fate, by heavens!" ejaculated a stalwart fellow who leaped up from the nearest table and covered Perdita with an outstretched hand of bronze. "Look at that Cleopatra, pards! Pretty as a seraph, but with ther teeth ov a tigress—I'll bet my head!"

The avenger was the cynosure of all eyes as she stood just beyond the door with a revolver in her right hand and her piercing look searching the crowd.

"Lookin' for anybody in particular?" laughed some one.

"Bet yer life she is!" cried the big man whose voice had greeted her. "I'm sorry ter say thet he just stepped out."

These words were greeted by a laugh that lent a new flash to Perdita's eyes.

"He is not here," she said in tones that told her disappointment.

"Dread Don, eh?"

"Dread Don!"

"He's liable ter turn up at any time 'most," said the big man.

"War you at his shanty?"

"I would not be here if he had been found there," was the quick reply.

The crowd laughed at the expense of the man who bit his lip vexatiously.

"Mebbe," called out another man whose elbow touched the counter. "Mebbe, ther Clan 'd do as well."

Perdita fixed her eyes on the man who had just spoken, and saw a dark-faced person of forty-five, with small eyes that seemed to dance over his high cheek-bones.

This was one of the men Reptile Ralph had derided, and the woman saw at once that the little man's estimate of him was not a true one.

"That man will fight!" said Perdita to herself. "Dread Don made no mistake when he chose him."

"Won't we do?" asked the man at the counter. "Thar's been a new deal which yer mayn't hev heard about. As ther Scriptor says, 'behold old things hev passed away an' all things hev become new.' Thar's a new Clan!"

"And you belong to it?"

"I'm one ov ther boys!"

"I don't want you then. I am here to see the captain."

"An' hyer ter play a hand with thet dropper?" and the eyes of the pard fell to the revolver in Perdita's hand.

"If the captain comes, yes!"

The men in the den looked at each other. The words were so coolly spoken that they could not be misunderstood. Perdita alone before the toughs of Red Blade was a picture as striking as pencil ever drew. Her answer said that she had come thither with a purpose which was doubly told by the cool eyes and gleaming pistol.

"A cooler person than thet one never invaded this den," said the man behind the counter to his nearest companion. "For Heaven's sake, get out o' hyer before she repeats the game Reptile Ralph played before he went off."

Before a reply could be made the interior of the whisky den rung with the report of a revolver outside.

Perdita instinctively turned half-way around, and the next second a heavy body falling against the door forced it open.

There was a loud exclamation as a man fell inside and struck the counter ere he hit the floor.

"Reptile Ralph!" somebody said, and the whole crowd surged forward.

Perdita the avenger was borne to the door by the eager men, who quite forgot her presence in the twinkling of an eye.

"Lift the galoot up, an' let us make a sieve of the man who shot Slim Ivan!" cried somebody in the rear of the crowd. "Hold the little devil up if he lives. We want him for the foulest shot ever delivered in Red Blade!"

A dozen hands swooped down upon the man on the floor, and he was being lifted when a thrilling cry was heard.

"You've made Red Blade's boss trap yer own,

eh?" was the laugh of a giant who held the struggling form of Perdita, and from whom even the men who were clutching Reptile Ralph started back.

"Dread Don! Just in time, too!" cried half a dozen men.

Nobody had seen the man who had leaped like a tiger across the threshold of the Red Blade den, and who now, in the light of the lamps that revealed his magnificent figure and triumphant eyes, held Perdita with a clutch that was doom itself.

No one asked now, with this man before the crowd, who had shot Reptile Ralph. The answer was in his look; Dread Don had "got" the little cyclone of Red Blade.

The roughs drew off from the man lying at the foot of the counter, although they knew that he was not dead.

They were struck by the coolness with which the woman so unexpectedly captured was regarding her bitterest enemy.

She saw the dark-brown hat that surrounded Dread Don's head, and looked once at the collar of the coat he wore. There was no lace on the latter, and her thoughts went back to the man she had left under the desperado's cabin.

"This is playing the last hand in the game," said the captain of the Clan. "My first thought was when I shot the man yonder that I was bagging Montez, but no difference—he'll be easy game when we have finished you. This is one of the traps that never fail, you know that."

"It failed six years ago," said Perdita, showing her teeth.

"Not through me. I left the sealing of that cage to another man—to Mica Marie. If he had done his duty completely, you would not be in my trap now. I like your eyes. They remind me of those we shut up forever in the mountain cage."

"Villain! that was my sister!" cried Perdita, drawing back, but not out of his power, for his strength was too great.

"I know that. It was to get satisfaction for her that you came to Red Blade to play the game that has failed. It is very plain to those who know something. The big bonanza was the start of it all. We've won it at last, Dora. Let me tell you hyer that the last hand is the biggest an' the best. It is Dread Don's!"

The roughs looked on astonished and the silence was broken by the man who staggered to his feet and yelled:

"We'll make that ther boss lie yet!"

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE BIG BONANZA.

To go back a step, back to the depths of the bonanza under Red Blade, where we left Dread Don confronting the man in the mask, let us see what happened just before he put in an appearance so suddenly at Paradise Phil's.

The longer the captain of the Cool Clan looked into the eyes behind the black mask the more certain he became of its wearer's identity.

"A thousand to one that that man is my late recruit, Jasper James," he said to himself. "I see now that he came to me to play a game in connection with Montez and Perdita. I have not the least doubt of it now."

Thus convinced Dread Don attempted to draw his guard into conversation for the purpose of hearing his voice again, but the man in the mask stubbornly refused to be cajoled.

For some time the two men stood face to face, and Dread Don with his hands bound behind him was at the mercy of the black eyes that never left him for a moment.

Montez, clad in the desperado-sport's coat and wearing his gray sombrero had been gone some time, long enough Dread Don thought to have found Perdita!

"You might as well take your mask off. I know you," suddenly said the Clan's captain. "It took me a little time to fix you, but I've got you solid enough, Jasper James."

He thought he saw the eyes emit a gleam that betrayed their owner, and confirmed his accusation.

"You ar' all in one game!" continued Dread Don advancing a step with his eyes fixed on his guard. "What ar' you goin' ter do with the bonanza when you get it, eh?"

"Back!" moved the mask just the least, but the word was sternly spoken and the revolver covered the Red Blader's head.

"Not for a thousand!" grated Dread Don.

The next second he ducked his head and went at the masked man like a bomb. The threatened party tried to receive the charge, but too late. Dread Don's novel attack was made too suddenly to be parried and a moment later two men were rolling over the floor of the subterranean corridor.

Dread Don got up some distance from the place where he had struck the enemy. The darkness of an Egyptian night surrounded him, and he felt a thousand pains in his head.

Standing in the passage he listened but heard nothing. The light that illumined the spot where he had been a prisoner was out. Was the masked man dead?

"It is liberty anyway," ejaculated the desperado. "I will yet make things lively for the

Sherwood tigress and her pards. Let me see about my hands. They must first be free."

The boss of Red Blade moved along the rough wall of the corridor until he found in the darkness a rock sharp enough for his purpose. Backing against it he saw-sawed at the cords at his wrists until they parted with a slight snap and he was entirely free.

"When they beat this cool blade they'll know it!" he laughed, and then he turned back with a revolver in his right hand.

It was the cunning desperado now. His step was the stealthy one of the panther that steals from limb to limb after the intended victim. A dozen times he stopped before he reached the scene of his charge. The light was not seen.

Suddenly from the gloom, and seemingly from the unseen wall itself, a hand fell upon his shoulder.

Dread Don stopped as if an electric bolt had passed through him. The next second the same hand caught his throat, and he was forced against the wall as a voice said:

"You would come back!—I was waiting for you. Aha! your hands are free!"

"Yes, the tiger is unchained!" hissed the Red Blader. "At it we go, Jasper James!"

If the lamp had been lighted there, it would have revealed two men, well matched physically, struggling for the mastery between the walls of the underground corridor.

The battle was being fought too closely for revolvers, and the men who had grappled did not seem to think of the knife. From wall to wall they went, now squarely on their feet, and now almost down. More than once at least the drawing of knives was prevented; it seemed that the battle had to be fought out with nature's arms alone.

For ten minutes the two men fought like well-matched tigers, and then they stopped as if by mutual consent, for breath.

"Shall we keep this up?" asked Dread Don's antagonist.

"Yes," was the answer. "I am going out from hyer ter play Hades in the mountain air, or when Perdita comes she will find me hyer dead! Hyer we go, Jasper James—this time for the death-clutch!"

The challenge was not refused by the desperado's enemy, and he met the attack with a display of strength which, after the short breathing-spell, was something wonderful.

"Oh! let's fight like men," suddenly said Dread Don. "Let's play 'bowie-hunt.'"

"I am with you," was the prompt reply. "This is boy's play, and we are men."

The two drew apart and stood against the two walls of the corridor, with six feet of darkness between them.

Dread Don drew a bowie, with a full eight-inch blade, and tested the point with his finger.

"What's yer blade?" he asked the unseen foe.

"Seven," came the reply from a point nearly opposite his station.

"I kin go you one better," laughed the Red Blader. "Ar' yer ready?"

"Ready!"

The two men, armed now with the most terrible of all weapons for close fighting, stood ready to renew the combat, which should be to the death.

Did Jasper James know that his enemy held an advantage over him, inasmuch as he doubtless still wore the steel doublet against which Perdita had broken her blade?

He might have discovered this in the hand-to-hand contest just ended, and it was now his care to plant his knife where there was no protection.

Dread Don leaned forward, and tried to locate his enemy by his breathing; he dared not put out his hand, for it might touch the man, and reveal his (Don's) position.

The seconds flitted while the two men stood almost face to face, one waiting for the other to disclose himself in some manner. The right hand of each encircled the hilt of a bowie, and the ears of both were on the alert.

If Dread Don could have seen his foe he would have started. The mask was gone now, and the man stood revealed not as Jasper James, but, as Full Hand Frank, the young sport who came to Red Blade at the commencement of the present desperate game.

He leaned forward, too, and listened for Dread Don's betrayal of himself in some manner. If he had put out his hand at a certain time, he would have touched the cool man of Red Blade.

"I have no right to take this man's life," suddenly ejaculated Full Hand Frank. "It belongs to Perdita, and when I came ahead of her to watch for her, and to keep track of Dread Don, I swore solemnly, in her presence, not to shed his blood. She is liable to come at any time, for Montez has gone to hunt her in the camp. What if I fight this darkness duel out and finish him? But one thing can happen. Perdita, who has but one aim in life, will turn on me, and then good-by Ruby, of the blue eyes."

Thus reasoned and thought the young man, who stood within a few feet of the deadliest bowie in the Black Hills.

He drew down the wall with the last sentence

half thought out, and listened for Dread Don to follow.

Quick as the desperado was, he did not hear the movement, but he stood a leaning statue in the gloom with arm uplifted and his whole body ready for the fray.

Full Hand Frank kept on, and soon was out of reach of the sport's best leap, and beyond ear-shot.

Dread Don grew impatient.

"He is crouchin' low for me, somewhar," he muttered. "I hev but ter give him a clew ter my position, an' the bowie will go for my life chest. I didn't think it'd be this way when I proposed the bowie hunt. Hang it all! why don't he open the battle?"

Tired with what the desperado sport thought his enemy's perverseness, Dread Don executed a movement to the right, and then putting his mouth close to the wall so as to disguise the sound, he said:

"Are yer waitin' for daylight, Jasper?"

The only sound in reply was the echo of his own words, and Dread Don laughed to himself.

"Dumb as an oyster," he murmured. "He'll try suthin', though, if he thinks he's got my position."

Another minute of silence followed, and then—Dread Don suddenly turned his head to one side.

For the first time since the abrupt termination of the hand-to-hand fight there was the noise that indicated the movements of a person.

A firmer grip on the sport's bowie hilt was the immediate result of the noise.

"He has moved at last!" said Dread Don, turning toward the noise, and planting himself firmly on the unyielding floor of the corridor. "A few more steps will bring us together, and then—we'll end ther heart-hunt in ther dark."

Strange to say, somebody was coming down the corridor, and straight toward the giant rough, who was waiting for him with lips firmly pressed together and his whole strength at command.

Did Dread Don think that Jasper James was coming upon him in this manner? Whether he did or not, he intended to slay the man in the gloom of the corridor.

A minute would finish it all, and the heart of the boss of Red Blade beat the seconds off.

"One more step and I have him," muttered Dread Don, and the right hand crept back ready for the stroke. "He thinks I have sloped—the fool! He will discover all in a breath."

All at once the left hand of the captain of the mountain Clan went forward like an arrow from a bow.

The body followed instantly, the left hand found a human figure amid the gloom, and then thud!—the eight-inch blade came down!

There was a cry which told that the blow in the dark had not been struck in vain. The body of Dread Don's victim quivered in his grasp.

"I've seen fools in my time, Jasper James, but you scoop 'em all!" he laughed, and a moment later the body dropped.

"Now for a tigress hunt above ground!" he exclaimed, and he went down the dark corridor with blood on the bowie blade.

He struck no match over the face of his foe. If he had he would have met with a startling surprise.

CHAPTER XXXII.

RED BLADE GETS EVEN.

WITH Perdita in his power Dread Don felt elated. He held her at arm's length before the toughs of the camp, and laughed when he boasted that she had reached the end of her game.

"If you think so, go on," said the woman, looking him calmly in the eyes, and then with lips tightly shut she awaited her doom.

The boss of the mountain camp glanced at three men who came forward and waited for orders.

"Take that woman," he said, pushing Perdita toward them, and she was in the clutches of the new Clan.

Dread Don walked to the counter and faced the crowd whose eyes had followed him.

"Gentlemen of Red Blade, you may want to know why that woman is going to lose a certain game," he said, addressing them. "You know the unwritten law of the Black Hills—that law which gives blow for blow. She came hyer hunting for my life with a bowie pointed for a single purpose. She has struck and failed. Is this not so, woman?"

The eyes of Perdita which had coolly watched him, flashed at the question.

"Yes," she cried, "you dare not tell these men why I came to Red Blade; you are afraid to go back and give them an insight into the villainy of six years ago; you dare not tell them of a murdered old man, of imprisoned sisters, and of the daggered hand of one of them. No! all this you keep back, Dread Don. Let me talk to the men of Red Blade."

A derisive smile played with the desperado's lips, even when he saw the crowd lean forward anxious for Perdita to go on.

"I am not Perdita the tigress," she said to the men. "I took that name, because under

my true one, I might not be able to hunt down the villain of villains, Dread Don of Red Blade. I am Dora Sherwood, the only living daughter of the man who re-discovered the bonanza that undermines this camp."

The effect upon the men was electrical; they glanced from Perdita to the captain of the Clan who laughed as he said:

"She will spin some gauzy tales, boys. The one just thrown out is story number one. A bonanza under Red Blade! That's the joke of the season!"

The new Clan laughed in concert with Dread Don but the others did not join in.

"Let it be proven a lie when I am through," continued Perdita.

"There exists now under this very camp a mine whose wealth is well-nigh fabulous. It was for the secret of its location that Dread Don played the cool crimson hand that won some years ago. It cost a father and daughter their lives, it cost a child its mother and it made me a maniac for years. He may laugh it down, but in his heart he owns the crime and the lie! He will tell you to find the mine if you think it exists; he will even offer to hunt with you. Let me direct you to the entrance, men of Red Blade, if you will go—"

"Hold! we've had enough of this!" cried Dread Don making a signal that his men understood.

"I am still boss of Red Blade and I will hear no more tales as gauzy as the one that woman spins. She talks against time, she talks for the coming of the yellow-skinned pard who came with her to Red Blade. I mean Montez."

"A dead man will never come," said Perdita.

"Dead?" echoed Dread Don. "Who says that he is dead?"

"I do," was the answer. "I own to the terrible deed that makes my hatred of you increase ten-fold. He came to me while I waited for you in your cabin; he wore your hat and coat, and before I knew it was Montez I fired."

"Killed yer pard, eh?" laughed Dread Don. "You've saved Red Blade a job, woman. You need not go on with your story. The end of the last play is hyer."

Perdita turned to the men whose eyes had not left her for a moment.

"Make Red Blade the abode of fools by letting Dread Don hoodwink you all," she went on. "The bonanza exists as certain as the sky hangs over you. The cabin of the Clan's captain—"

"Enough!" cried Dread Don, and stepping forward he caught Perdita's arm. "What's the use of spinnin' a yarn like this? Away with the Santa Fe tigress! The spell of lunacy has come back."

"Would to Heaven it had! Would that I could forget the past; but I never can!"

The new Clan closed suddenly about the avenger, for there was a gleam that threatened rescue in the eyes of the men, who were separated from her by less than six feet.

"To the door!" commanded Dread Don, and then looking into the eyes of the crowd, he went on with devilish coolness:

"Remember, Red Blade, that this woman is my one enemy. I am judge and jury in her case."

"An' executioner," said a voice, that reached the sport's ear.

"Yes, and executioner!" he finished. "If you think the bonanza story is true, find it an' divide. But remember that I deal with the tigress who has hunted for my heart with the perseverance of sworn vengeance."

He turned as he uttered the last word and followed his men, who had passed beyond the door.

"That's the man who belongs to you," he said, at the door, pointing to the man who lay at the foot of the counter with death mirrored in his eyes. "Reptile Ralph belongs to you for the shooting of Slim Ivan. If you don't hurry up, death will baffle you all."

The next moment Dread Don was gone, and the men of the mountain camp gazed beyond the open door and forgot the man to whom he had called their attention.

"Gents, as I feel death among my vitals, the tigress did not lie!" said Reptile Ralph, as he tried to lift himself—a futile effort.

"What's that?"

The crowd came toward him, and a dozen hands thrust as many cocked revolvers into his face.

"D'ye think I'd split ther truth now?" smiled Reptile Ralph. "A man with death at his heart-strings, an' cold lead grinnin' at 'im, ain't likely ter lie."

"Lift him up! Make him face us all!" cried several voices, and the little man of grit was raised and held against the counter.

"Now, go on!" commanded the leader of the crowd. "This is Red Blade, Reptile, an' you killed Slim Ivan."

"Ther man with ther tissue lungs," said Reptile. "If I had it ter do over, I think I'd spare ther galoot; but that's neither hyer nor thar. You want ter know about ther bonanza thet Perdita talked about."

"We do. We want it in few words."

"Arter them ther noose, eh?"

"Proceed!"

"Answer me first. I want tarmes; no noose, no lie. Thet's me—Reptile Ralph, ov Red Blade!"

The men exchanged quick glances that held an important consultation.

The little man was dying, all saw that; he knew it himself. But it was the disgrace of being hanged that rankled in his heart, and he knew that the men of the camp had sworn to give him the rope for his brutal shooting of Slim Ivan the consumptive.

"Tarmes!" he said. "No noose, no lie!"

"We agree," answered the burly spokesman of the crowd. "Give us the truth and death may play out the game he's playin' now."

"The's business."

The door of the saloon stood wide open during this scene and the pleasant night air came in.

Nobody went to the threshold to see the man who stood a few feet from it with a pair of dark eyes riveted upon Reptile Ralph, his body inclined slightly forward and a heavy revolver hanging from his right hand.

The man held against the counter by two members of the crowd inside gathered his strength for the revelation he had intended to make.

"I've got ter make it a few words for death's goin' ter trump my ace within three minutes," he said. "Under Red Blade is a bonanza thet I've hunted for for years. It war the entrance thet puzzled me but all's cl'ar now. You go ter a sartain shanty in camp—"

At that moment the revolver clutched in the starlight rose to a level with Reptile Ralph's heart.

"He never gets the secret out!" grated a low voice, and then a report startled everybody in Paradise Phil's.

Reptile Ralph pitched forward with a sharp cry and broke from the grasp of the men who held him. Half-a-dozen hands darted out to catch him, and he was held up by main force a few feet from the counter.

"He ain't dead," said some one. "Shut the door. He'll give us the lay-out yet."

Somebody shut the door as the man in the starlight walked off with triumph in his eyes and a smile at the corners of his lips.

Reptile Ralph was held by the anxious crowd who saw that the last shot had completed the work done by the first. He was carried forward, and brandy, the hottest stuff imaginable, forced down his throat.

The effect was to throw spirit into the little man's eyes, and the crowd kept silent.

"I—guess—they've—got Reptile—at—last!" were the words they heard, and then a final gasp.

"Thunders! he's gone!" cried one of the men that held him and the next moment the body of the little man and Noisy Nick's would-be avenger lay lifeless at the feet of a disappointed crowd.

"It is somewhar in Red Blade," said one. "What war he saying about the shanties when they got 'im?"

"Perdita war gettin' thar too when Dread Don stopped her. Ther way ter find ther mouth ov ther bonanza is ter search every shanty in camp."

The men seemed to accept this proposition with eagerness, but all at once the figure of Dread Don came between.

Could Red Blade play successfully against that cool desperado and his Clan?

"It's worth striking for," said a man, who lowered his voice almost to a whisper. "Dread Don is playing against the tigress from the South. Who would have thought that we have been living over a bonanza, the secret of which was all the time in the possession of the Clan?"

The men looked astonished and nobody replied.

"If I war ter search the cabins the first one would be Dread Don's," the last speaker resumed.

At that moment the door opened, and the crowd saw the handsome figure of the boss of Red Blade.

"Gentlemen," he said, coolly, "it seems to be a question of the location of the mouth of the bonanza. Let me locate it for you all. Whar it is is eternal death!"

That was all; the man vanished.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE DOOM OF THE TIGRESS.

FOUR men in a room the walls of which are stone.

They are tall, heavily-built men and look much alike in the light of the two lanterns held by two of the group.

An hour has passed since the drama played last at Paradise Phil's.

Near the men stands a woman whose countenance and position tell that she has not come to the subterranean apartment of her own accord.

Straight as a queen in her regal robes, she faces the four men whose leader can be selected by his bearing and the flashings of his dark eyes.

Need we name the picture we have sketched thus briefly?

It is Perdita before the new Cool Clan, and in the depth of the big bonanza under Red Blade.

She had been conducted to the chamber after her failure at Paradise Phil's, and by the way of Dread Don's cabin.

Perdita had expected to see Montez laying dead at the foot of the ladder where she had left him in the desperado's coat and sombrero, but what was her surprise to find no one there!

She looked at Dread Don in the lantern-light when she found herself disappointed, and beyond a slight smile there was no response. Did the boss of Red Blade know what had become of Montez?

The journey to the place where we find the Clan and its prisoner at the opening of this chapter was devoid of any other incident.

There was no doubt that the game was to be played out by the big sport, and he looked at Perdita in a manner that told her this.

"Look, worran!" said Dread Don, waving his hand from right to left and back again. "Does this cage look like the other one?"

Perdita had already taken in the dimensions of the cavern as they were revealed by the light of the lantern.

She said nothing in reply to the question; she knew it was a taunt.

"Is it larger than that one?" continued Dread Don. "From this cage there can be no escape; the other gave you up. Who helped you then?"

"A better man than Dread Don!" exclaimed the huntress.

"Montez, eh?"

"Montez!"

"An' you killed him by mistake? Dora, you don't show a bit of gratitude."

A sound like a groan parted the woman's lips.

"God knows it was the fault of the infernal livery he wore at the time," she said.

"My clothes, ha, ha!" laughed Dread Don.

"But why prolong this play. We ar' hyer to play the last hand out. I don't want your blood, Dora. I wouldn't shed one drop of it for the world. The duel I fought under ground a while ago is enough for me in that line for some time to come."

Perdita could not keep back a slight exclamation.

"Jasper James was your friend, wasn't he?" continued the Red Blader.

"Did you fight him?" cried the avenger.

"I had to. It was bowie to bowie, seven ag'in' eight, and the eight-inch blade won. He was your helper?"

"My friend, but what of it now?" was the reply, and the four men saw the deep disappointment that filled Perdita's eyes.

"It does put you in a bad place. Montez dead, Jasper James in the same fix, an' you in the cage that never lets the hunter-bird out."

"Go on!" exclaimed Perdita. "Play your hand to the end as quickly as possible. I have failed, yet I blame not Heaven. I have tried to reach the heart of the man who slew my father for the secret of this mine, and then put an end to my sister's life because she would not let him go unhunted. Is it a wonder that these crimes made an avenger of me—that they overthrew my reason and made me for years the mad woman of Santa Fe? There is yet another, Dread Don."

"The blue-eyed viper who showed up hyer the night Colonel Snowdrop came?" exclaimed the Red Blader, laughing derisively as he leaned forward. "Why, it'll be no diversion to crush that little serpent."

"Wait and see! The blood of her mother grows hot in her veins at thought of you. She will break no dagger on your steel vest when she comes."

Brighter grew Perdita's eyes as she threw these words into the teeth of Dread Don.

"With her ends the line," said the captain of the Clan. "She may come back."

"She will!"

Ten minutes later the sole occupant of the cavern was a woman, who stood in the middle of the floor and watched a light hanging beyond her reach against one of the walls.

The bird of prey from the south had been walled in, and the voice and footsteps of Dread Don had died away.

Perdita could see the dim walls of the underground prison; she could feel the huge rock which the united strength of four mountain Herculeses had rolled against the single entrance, shutting it beyond the possibility of putting a hand out.

Not an audible word had escaped her since the departure of Dread Don and his Clan.

She had listened at the rock, but had heard no sound, and her next move was to come back to the middle of the chamber and watch the light, which would soon go out and leave her immersed in Egyptian gloom.

There was something terrible in the thought that, after all, her vengeance-hunt had failed, and that instead of going back to the South successful, she had lost her friends, and was the prisoner of the bonanza which had cost so much blood.

She was to die there! She might call for help, but none would come; the depths of the mine would treasure her cries and let none reach a friendly ear. Dread Don could have devised no harsher punishment than the one he had inflicted; he had shut her up to think of her fail-

ure, to hate him and his success, and to die at last of starvation in the bowels of the earth.

Perdita watched the light till it flickered and threatened to go out.

"Oh, for one more attempt!" she suddenly exclaimed. "Hear me, Heaven, and let me fulfill the oath taken long ago. Am I to perish here? Is the wretch of the Northwest to triumph with a laugh on his lips! I am Perdita yet, though, in his cage. My God! must he find me death's captive when he comes back with his Clan to inspect this dungeon?"

The silence that followed Perdita's words was disturbed by no echo; but all at once, five minutes later, a sound came into the cavern.

The light went out as the walled-in huntress reached the stone that blocked the entrance almost as effectually as if it had been mortised there. She put her ear to the top of the stone and listened.

She had heard a sound which was like, yet at the same time unlike, a human voice. Now she listened for a repetition.

"Shot by one and daggered by the other!" said a voice, which made Perdita recoil from the stone. "I guess this is the ending of my part of the game."

"What is that?" cried the huntress, going back to the entrance and listening like a person suddenly bereft of reason. "That man must be my friend. Shot and daggered, did he say? It is Full Hand Frank!"

The next moment the woman was calling to the person whose voice she had heard.

"I am here in a cavern, shut in by Dread Don!" she cried. "It shall yet be a lie—his assertion that he has played the game through. Come to me, Full Hand Frank. Vengeance never dies in the heart of Dora Sherwood."

Strange to say, there was no reply. Again and again the imprisoned woman called. The result was always the same—silence!

It was a mystery she could not fathom. She had heard the man's voice with singular distinctness, not a syllable had escaped her ears, but now her own words had died away without a response. What could it mean? Was the man "shot and daggered" dead?

Perdita exhausted herself in trying to get a reply from without, and at last she went back through midnight darkness and gave up in despair.

"Fate is against me," she said. "The mantle of vengeance must fall upon Julia's child—upon Edith who calls herself Ruby Ryan. God above me! nerve her arm, give her a sure eye and let her play to a crimson end the game of the Sherwoods against the despot of Red Blade. I can play it no longer. I have failed. Edith, thou shalt not."

In the gloom of the cavern underneath Red Blade all became still, for the tigress from the South lay in a deep swoon on the hard stone floor, and did not see the man who came down a corridor and felt his way to the stone that shut her in.

For ten minutes he listened there, and more than once called her by name. Of course there was no response.

"They left her dead in there. Even if she were alive I could render no assistance. Shot and daggered, I am at the end of my life cord. I'd give a thousand worlds if they were mine for my old strength for one short hour!"

The speaker whoever he was went back; he tottered down the narrow corridor of the old mine supporting himself along the wall and now and then intermingling curses and groans.

If a light had fallen upon him at any time the holder of it would have seen a sight from which the bravest of men would have recoiled.

A hatless man with a face covered with dried and drying blood, and with the same hideous coloring on his clothes. Added to this eyes that had the glare of a demon's and hands that were dark with the grime of the bonanza walls.

Such was the man who haunted the mine while Perdita lay in her swoon, and while Dread Don stood before the new Cool Clan in the suburbs of Red Blade.

"The last of the old Clan has gone to Deadwood," he said to the three. "Instead of warning him off by throwing him Oregon Oscar's hand clutching a threat he should have been triggered. It was the poorest play I ever made, but I will rectify it. The mine is to be guarded till I come back. Reptile Ralph's death will teach Red Blade that this is no baby game. As for the bird in the cage, let her flutter her life out against the bars."

The boss of Red Blade turned from his followers and set himself on the trail of Jim Dandy who was likely to sell the bonanza secret to the cool heads and steady hands of Deadwood.

His failure to kill the last survivor of the old Clan was indeed a mistake, as he was soon to discover to his cost.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BUCKSKIN BAG.

SAN FRANCISCO!

We transport the reader to the flourishing city of the gold coast, for there is to be played one of the concluding scenes of our wild romance.

It was the mid-afternoon of a bright day when a man who looked as if he had lately come from the mountains caught sight of a person who was physically a giant, and a giant in good clothes at that.

"The colonel, for a million!" exclaimed the man first mentioned. "Can it be that he holds the treasure Mica Marle lost? Ther cap'n never thought of him when he sent me ter Frisco; but he said: 'Whoever presents the order mustn't get the dust.' An' he shall not."

The man noticed by the speaker who lounged near the open door of one of the most prominent banks of the city was our old acquaintance Colonel Erastus Snowdrop, *alias* Shasta Leon. He had reached Frisco in safety, and in all probability with the girl Ruby with whom we saw him last in the stage that bowled over the mountain trail between Custer and Sidney.

And the man who had espied him was Wildcat Lige, Dread Don's spy and messenger, and he had come to Frisco as we know to prevent the cashing of the check found in Mica Marle's buckskin amulet.

Colonel Snowdrop strolled past the bank watched closely by Wildcat Lige. If he had the valuable paper he made no effort to have it cashed, but he looked longingly beyond the doors and the mountain spy thought he saw his eyes snap greedily.

"That settles it," ejaculated Wildcat. "Ther fool as ther cap'n calls him, hes got the amulet. Nothin' else would fetch him ter Frisco arter leavin' Red Blade in ther manner he did."

The next moment the colonel had a man at his heels, and in a short time he had been run down by Dread Don's pard.

A small hotel was found to be the colonel's quarters, and Wildcat Lige saw scrawled on the register the legend "Col. Erastus Snowdrop and Lady."

"Jehu! has the old fellow found a wife somewhere!" cried the mountain tough. "'Most any man kin pick up a woman nowadays, when he has a prospect of three hundred thousand ahead. I'd like ter see ther daisy he's found. Got'er at Custer most likely, or somewhar this side."

Half an hour later Wildcat Lige was at his post again near the bank counter. It was near closing time and the spy glanced anxiously at the bank clock whose long blue hands ticked the seconds off over piles of glittering coin.

"I guess he's goin' ter put off ther cashing ov his find," he said at last.

Within ten minutes of closing time, and at a moment when the bank officers were not very busy the rather imposing form of Colonel Snowdrop appeared at the door.

"Now for his game," muttered Wildcat Lige.

Walking up to the cashier's window with an air of importance the man from Jordan Valley ran one hand beneath the breast of his coat, and produced an article that threw a quick glitter into Wildcat's eyes.

It was the well-worn and dingy amulet of the dead tough of Red Blade!

Wildcat Lige took one noiseless step toward the colonel as the bag was produced, and the next moment it fell upon the polished paying board before the spectacled cashier whose eyes were already beginning to fill with wonderment.

"I am Colonel Erastus Snowdrop, and the legal owner of that package and its contents," said the big adventurer. "I'll take the money in notes."

The next instant an arm went before the colonel's face, and he was pushed back by the stalwart man who sprung to the counter.

"We'll see about this," said a harsh voice, and the eyes of the two men instantly met. "Thar is su'thin' ter be settled before Mica Marle's money is drawn from this bank. I'll take ther amulet. I represent Red Blade an' ther man who war bowied for this treasure."

At the same time a hand darted toward the package which the cashier was about to take up.

"Don't give him that!" flashed the colonel.

The remonstrance came too late, for the bronze clutches of Wildcat Lige had fallen upon the amulet, and he stepped back with triumph in his black eyes.

"I've been waitin' like a tiger for yer," he said, to the spell-bound colonel. "We didn't expect ter see you come along with ther paper bonanza, but thar war ter be no difference who came. Want ter fight, eh? I'm yer man. That's a part ov my final instructions."

The burly figure of Dread Don's messenger stood before the colonel, and a hand that was as quick as his black eye clutched the butt of a six-shooter.

For a moment a duel was imminent, but Colonel Snowdrop turned to the mute cashier and said:

"I forbid the payment of the check in the buckskin bag to anybody but Erastus Snowdrop."

"We must cash it to the person who presents it," was the answer. "This is a very peculiar case. The bank solemnly agreed with the depositor that whoever presented the check which was sewed up in the buckskin bag in the bank's presence some years ago, the same should be paid the amount in full! no interest."

"But it has just been taken from me."

"We can take no cognizance of that when the check is presented. You may have recourse to the law, Mr. Snowdrop."

The furious colonel bit his lip and glared at the mountain pard, whose triumph could not be concealed.

"Try ther law, colonel," said Wildcat Lige. "Possession ar' nine p'int's ov it anyhow, they say. I guess I'll cash ther bonanza in the future."

The grin on Wildcat's face was exasperating. The amulet had already disappeared under his jacket, and he went toward the door as the hour struck for closing the bank.

"We're sorry," said the cashier to the colonel, as he lowered the little window for the day. "The man who took the check must have followed you."

"No, he lay in wait for me hyer," was the reply. "If I don't present that check at this counter in person within twenty-four hours you can add my name to the list of fools. They smooth the tiger's hair the wrong way sometimes."

The angry man turned on his heel, and several men laughed behind the cashier's counter as he strode madly off.

On the street he looked for Wildcat Lige, but that worthy had vanished.

"I can afford to give twenty-five thousand for him before daylight," said the colonel to himself.

A little afterward he might have been seen in consultation with several city detectives, who listened attentively to his description of Wildcat Lige.

"I will pay twenty-five thousand dollars for the delivery to me of that man and a buckskin bag which he has on his person. I care more for the article than the man. If he should resist arrest, gentlemen, and your revolvers should go off with fatal effect, the reward will be as cheerfully paid."

The detectives smiled, and the bargain was agreed to. Twenty-five thousand dollars was a good reward to pay for a mountain rough and a little bag of buckskin several inches in diameter and repulsive in appearance; but the export of Jordan valley knew the value of both.

"I've set a trap that he doesn't dream of," chuckled the colonel, as he walked toward his little hotel with his thoughts on victory over the cool blade who had outwitted him at the bank.

His detectives were already on the lookout, and he had reasons for suspecting that the morning would see the triumph of his new scheme.

"I'll keep my loss from my soon-to-be queen of the coast," he said, while he neared the hotel. "Her blue eyes will laugh if I tell her the truth. She said more than once on the way to Frisco that I'd never finger Mica Marle's bonanza."

Dusk had fallen over the city when he reached the secluded building where he had registered with the fair young girl he had forced to accompany him from Custer.

He went at once to the second floor and turned down a certain corridor with a smile at his lips.

"I'll visit Ruby a moment, and then hunt in person for the man from Red Blade."

The next moment he opened the door of a little room and entered unannounced. A woman sat in a chair near the window and turned as he came in.

"I'm back, Ruby," he said. "This is the same old Frisco—"

He stopped suddenly for the woman had risen and drawn to her full height faced him with flashing eyes.

"Your prisoner has gone back to the path of vengeance, and I am here for the same thing," said the woman before the thunder-struck colonel could utter even an exclamation of astonishment. "She went back with money furnished by me. It was by the merest accident that I found you. Colonel Snowdrop, when you turned me off in mid-winter in the mountain camp and laughed when I swore to pay you for your infamy, you were Gold Gideon. Did you cash the check you stole from the corpse of Mica Marle, *alias* Reginald Ralfe? I think not from your look. You did not look for me here? No! you believed the man I once sent to you with the story of my death."

She was beautiful in the tigerish ferocity that clothed her face and gleamed in her eyes.

All at once she came toward the colonel with the glitter of something white in her hands.

He threw up his arms to keep her off but with a sudden bound she landed between them, and the twain, man and woman, writhed for a spell over the soft carpet.

After awhile, the woman left the hotel quietly by the ladies' entrance. Once she looked up at the second-story windows, and her eyes seemed to laugh.

"They've been playing a long drama among the mountains, the girl Ruby told me, and he had a part in it," she murmured. "They can now ring the curtain down on his career. I have found Gold Gideon at last!"

There was astonishment in the hotel when the big guest was found dead on the floor of Ruby's room, and the girl got the credit for the deed.

The next day a man entered a certain bank

and was confronted by two men who presented revolvers as his hand moved toward his hip. "We want you," said one of the couple, and the men, Colonel Snowdrop's detectives, marched Wildcat off.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE LAST RED PLAY.

It was night in Deadwood.

In one of the quietest gambling dens in the famous city of the Black Hills, a man who was the observed of every inmate of the place for his splendid physique and dark, but handsome face, sat at one of the faro tables playing coolly and without a word.

They all knew him, for he had a reputation beyond the camp where he was boss, and the visiting strangers who asked that night who he was, received the reply, "Dread Don, of Red Blade."

The reader has not forgotten that we saw him last on his way to Deadwood to find Jim Dandy of the old Clan, and to prevent him from selling the secret of the big bonanza to the cool heads and steady hands of that Black Hills capital.

A few days had passed since his leaving Red Blade, but he still tarried at Deadwood. If he had "found" Jim Dandy, he had told no one, and the fact that the secret had not been sold, was almost proof enough that his mission had been successful.

This being the case, there was no necessity for an immediate return. The new Clan could contend with the few hotheads of the camp, and had he not told them that the way to the bonanza was the way to death? If Perdita had killed Montez by mistake as she had remorsefully confessed, and he (Dread Don) had finished Full Hand Frank in the bowie duel in the dark, what could call him back?

As for the tigress, the dungeon cage had ended her career, and the only huntress left now was Ruby.

Ruby! Dread Don laughed derisively whenever he thought of her. There was no danger from that quarter, and the man from Red Blade played on, feeling that the game for the great mine had been played out.

Few occupants of the Deadwood faro ranch, noticed the person who crossed the floor toward Dread Don's table when all eyes were admiring the cool blade of the rival camp, who was playing for big money in the glare of the lamps.

This person was rather slightly built, had an unnaturally white skin and piercing dark eyes; the latter singled Dread Don out as their owner crossed the room.

All at once a hand which could hardly belong to a man, it was so small and shapely, dropped like a snowflake upon the Red Blader's shoulder. Slight as the touch was, it seemed to send an electric thrill through him; he turned and looked up into eyes already riveted upon him.

There was a second of look and counterlook, then the boss of Red Blade sprung to his feet with an exclamation which all heard.

"My God! you?"

The eyes before him twinkled keenly, and a laugh rippled over his confronter's lips.

"The cage could not hold the bird, Dread Don!" was the answer, and with the last word the speaker stepped back, and threw up one hand, in which was something that scintillated in the lamplight.

The crowd looked on astonished, for in a flash, as it were, the person who confronted Dread Don had been transformed into a woman!

"In God's name how did you get out?" cried Don, speaking the question that forced itself before all other thoughts.

"The man at the door behind me, and the person you bowed in the dark, helped me to freedom."

Dread Don threw a quick look beyond the speaker and saw near the door of the ranch with arms quietly folded and a smile on his lips a person whom he instantly recognized.

"Jasper James!"

"Alias Full Hand Frank," said the woman in disguise.

"Then I cut another man."

"Montez."

"You said you killed him."

"I thought I had; my bullet tore along his skull, but it remained for you to give him your bowie while you were waiting for Full Hand Frank on the underground dueling ground. The New Mexican will not die, Dread Don. He waited for you to come back to Red Blade, but you would not. The days destroyed my patience—I could—I would wait no longer. I told you when shut in the bonanza cage that Edith should be the avenger, but I still live for the purpose that has burned in my blood for years. Stand back, gentlemen! The man before my revolver put himself there by deeds committed when there was no Red Blade, and before you had heard of Dread Don. If any of you have heard of Thomas Sherwood, you see his only living child before you now. I am the avenger of the dead. I have reached at last the end of the game which Dread Don boasted he would play out successfully."

A silence that was startling fell over the exciting tableau presented in the faro ranch.

If the boss of Red Blade expected to outwit the woman before him he showed it by no sign. There was no quivering of the lip; the eye had the fearless look that had characterized it for years.

"Because I have taken you at a disadvantage, Dread Don, I shall give no chances," Perdita suddenly went on. "It was in cool blood six years ago; it shall be in cool blood now. Here ends the game. Dora Sherwood and not Perdita the tigress plays it out!"

Some of the spectators said afterward that they saw the leveled revolver drop a fraction lower as the last word fell from the woman's lips, but this might have been conjecture.

Whether it dropped or not, there came a sudden report, a flash, a puff of white smoke, and a handsome athlete swayed for a moment ere he fell with a crash that seemed to lift twenty men off their feet!

Nobody stirred for ten seconds. The report of the death-dealing revolver died away, and the smoke spread along the ceiling of the faro ranch.

Perdita was the first to break the irksome silence.

"If I have not justly carried out the unwritten law of justice, men of Deadwood, I am your prisoner!" she said. "Listen to me and then pass judgment."

Before the strange crowd Perdita told a tale that made more than one man shut his lips hard, and more than one eye fell to the dead sport on the floor and flashed.

She deftly avoided locating the bonanza which had begun the game long before the commencement of our romance, but in plain but thrilling language she traced the crimes of Dread Don from the moment of her father's trouble with him to the hour of his doom.

When she finished the crowd came forward urged by a single impulse.

"If he had been Dread Don of Deadwood instead of Red Blade, our verdict would be what it is," said the leader. "You stand acquitted!"

Perdita turned with a smile to the young sport at the door and held out her hand.

Full Hand Frank advanced, and took something from beneath his coat.

The next moment Perdita stooped over Dread Don, and placed a strange object upon his breast.

The men of Deadwood leaned forward to see what it was, and several uttered exclamations of wonder.

On the bosom of Red Blade's boss lay a human hand pierced by a dagger!

"My sister's hand and Mica Marle's dagger," she said, looking up at the crowd. "He threw that dagger through it at the command of the tiger lying dead before you all. Before I came to Red Blade, I sent it to him to warn him that the war between us was to be fought out mercilessly on my part. The steel vest that once turned my dagger was of no use to-night. The Sherwood bullet is in his brain!"

We might end our story here with considerable propriety, but justice to the reader perhaps demands a further extension.

A few days after the last scene in the faro ranch a blue-eyed girl alighted from a stage in Red Blade and was astonished to see Perdita advance to greet her.

"You have come in time to take possession of your inheritance, Edith, but too late to play out the game you took an oath to play. You are Ruby Ryan no longer, but Edith my sister's child, and Sherwood's heir."

Afterward came the story of Dread Don's doom, and Perdita led the girl to the man who lay in an upper room in the Full Deck Hotel.

It was Montez.

Ruby, or Edith, had come back to Red Blade, but there was no work for her hand.

The secret of the big bonanza was no secret now, but nobody disputed its ownership with the blue-eyed girl.

Full Hand Frank was installed manager of the concern, and a few months ago he became a closer guardian of the fair young heiress.

When Montez recovered he suddenly disappeared one night with Perdita, who left a letter for Edith saying that they had left forever the scene of the last play in the game, and that they would seek somewhere in the great Southwest seclusion and happiness in love.

The new Clan did not resist the avengers after Dread Don's doom, and to-day a new Red Blade, rechristened and flourishing, stands where the old one stood.

Wildcat Lige managed to elude Colonel Snowdrop's detectives and got the big check cashed, after which he vanished to turn up elsewhere, an uncouth bonanza king.

Jim Dandy was never heard of after his departure from Red Blade, and it is almost certain that the knife or the revolver of Dread Don prevented him from selling his secret to the gold-hunters of Deadwood.

Here let us pause, with the game of gold and vengeance played to the bitter end.

THE END.

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